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Novelet by BILL HEUMAN

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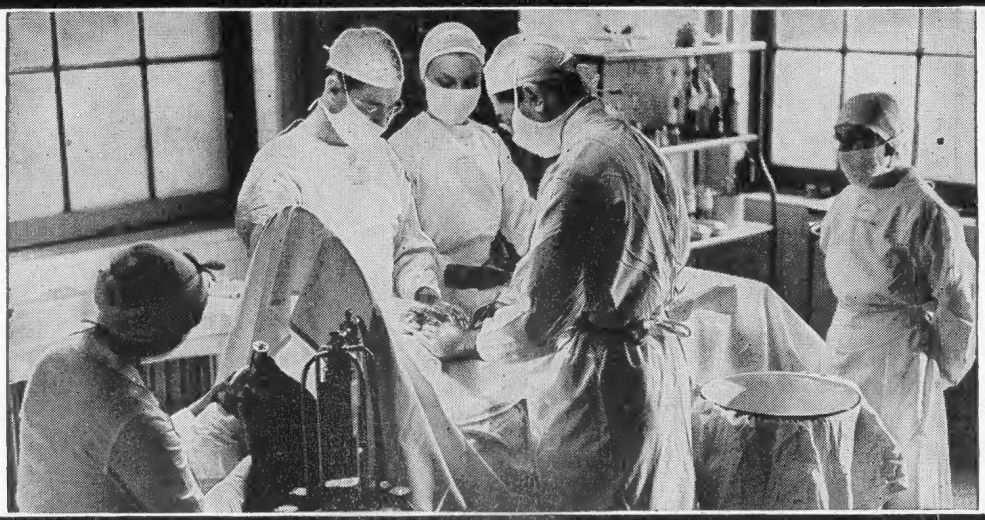

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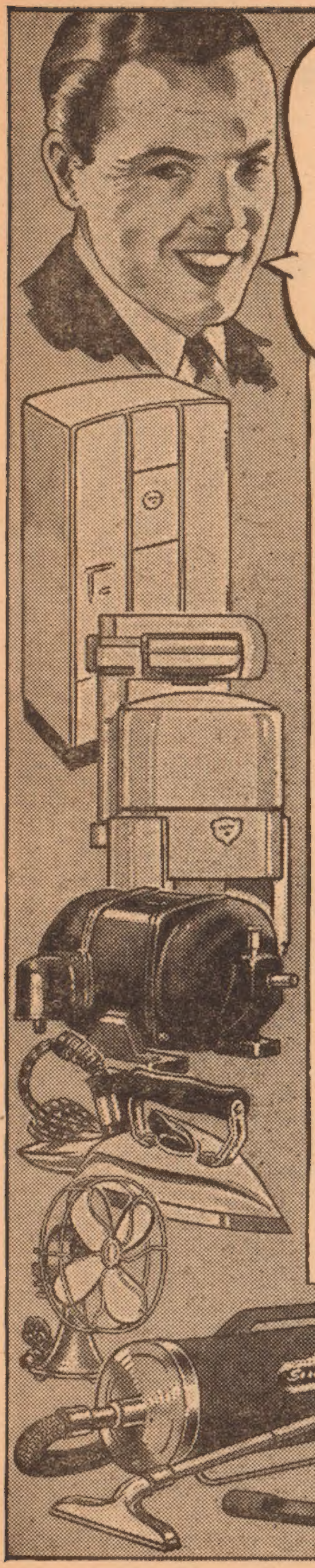

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SCALP HARVEST

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

Only one man could keep the seething caldron of the Sioux Reservation from spilling over and becoming a whooping, blood-crazed torrent threatening to drown the little settlement. Only one man, and Sergeant Morgan Carr knew where to find him—in the biggest gambling hell in town, a bottle near his shaking hands!

HE RODE OUT of the post at a sharp trot, jaunty forage cap pulled low over his pale blue eyes, the crossed sabers surmounted by a "6" on the front of the cap catching the last rays of the winter sun.

Blotches of snow lay in the hollows along the road to Neville, and the snow had

The solitary rider dashed toward them. A gun winked through the snow.

hardened to rock-like consistency. There had been thaws during the month of January, but the northern plains winter was far from over. Sergeant Morgan Carr had witnessed too many of these early winter thaws to be fooled by them. Months of dirty weather lay ahead of them, months of chill patrol work over iron-hard plains, through snow drifts, driving blizzard and icy rain.

"We intend to have patrols in the Indian Territory all winter," his commanding officer, Colonel Calendar, of the Sixth United States Cavalry, had stated in the fall of the year. "We must keep a finger on White Tail's pulse, and we must be prepared to hit him before he makes the first move."

Thinking of this, Morgan Carr grimaced, and pulled the collar of the heavy blue army coat closer about his neck. He rode the black Company "B" horse with his shoulders squared against the biting cold wind. His long, clean-shaven jaws were already getting blue from the cold. The previous day it had been warm with the snow melting on the slopes, but today the thaw was over, and the mud of the road hardened into granite ridges.

There was the indefinable smell of snow in the air, and Sergeant Carr sniffed it with some small satisfaction. Snow meant that the Sioux would huddle in their tepees along the Broken Arrow and the Squaw Rivers. No Indian liked snow, preferring to squat in his tepee, basking in the warmth of his fire. That meant there would be no warparties crossing the Reservation border, stealing ranchers' horses and cattle, occasionally murdering white settlers.

Two riders were approaching from the direction of Neville, and Morgan Carr recognized one of them as Lieutenant O'Neil. The second man rode slightly to the rear, shoulders hunched against the wind on his back.

Morgan's gloved hand rose in automatic salute as the two men drew near. O'Neil, a thin-faced man with a black mustache, returned the salute, pulling up his horse. He had his coat collar tight around his neck, and his face was tightened with the thin man's natural repugnance to cold weather.

"I saw Larry Kincaid in Kile's place," O'Neil said. He said it distinctly, but not loud enough for the trooper behind him to hear it.

Morgan Carr bit his lips. He nodded his, "Thank you, sir," and then saluted again as O'Neil moved on. He thought he saw the pity in the Lieutenant's dark eyes, and he knew what the officer was thinking. He was a fool to bother with Lieutenant Lawrence Kincaid. If the officer wanted to break himself that was his business. At Fort McDowell they were giving young Kincaid another six months before drink and gambling took the bar from his shoulders.

WHEN O'Neil was a hundred yards down the road, Morgan pushed the black into a sharp run. It was five miles from Fort McDowell to Neville, and Lieutenant Kincaid had already been absent from the post for three hours. In three hours, Morgan Carr knew, Kincaid could have gotten himself stone drunk in the ornate second floor room of Roland Kile's gambling establishment.

Sergeant Carr remembered the expression on Lucy Kincaid's face when she'd spoken to him outside Company B stables. She'd hoped no one would see them, but a half-dozen troopers had been crossing the parade ground from "K" barracks, and Morgan had seen the grins on the faces of several of them. The enlisted men, if not the commanding officer of Fort McDowell, knew Lieutenant Kincaid's weakness for drink and cards. Too many times Morgan Carr had rushed Kincaid out of Kile's Alhambra and into the nearest barber shop for a cold bath and hot coffee.

"He left for Neville at one o'clock," Lucky Kincaid had said. "I—I was wondering if you were going into town, Sergeant."

"Just leaving," Morgan had lied. "I'll give him your message, Mrs. Kincaid." She'd given him no message for her husband, but it was understood. He saw the gratitude in her brown eyes as he walked swiftly toward the quarters of Captain Drake.

The officer frowned when Morgan made his request for a pass. "Kincaid out?" he asked briefly.

Morgan Carr moistened his lips. "I believe so, sir," he said. He was not aware of the fact that even Drake knew of Kincaid's misconduct. If the Captain had learned the facts, it would be a short time before Colonel Calendar himself would have the information. Lieutenant Kincaid's stay at the post would be exceedingly brief from then on.

Morgan remembered the day the Kincaids had arrived at McDowell, very much in love with each other. Second Lieutenant Kincaid was six months out of West Point. That had been five years ago, and the couple were still regarded as the most devoted at the post, but the monotony of life at a frontier post had gotten the better of Lawrence Kincaid. The blasting heat of summer, and the cruel, cold winters had worked on Kincaid's nerves. There had been too few balls and house parties, and too many dull patrols.

"Some day, Sergeant," Captain Drake now stated quietly, "you'll be getting yourself into trouble." He paused and then added, "Your report come back from Washington, Sergeant?"

"No, sir," Morgan told him. "I'm still waiting, sir."

"Best of luck," the Captain observed. He turned to papers on his desk, and Morgan had gone out.

Riding toward Neville, Morgan thought about that report from the Capitol. He'd taken his examination two months before, hoping to receive his commission and step across that almost impassable line which existed between the non-commissioned and commissioned officers. For eight years Morgan had been content to be a non-com, but Larry Kincaid had persuaded him to try for the examination, and had even coached him during the summer and early winter months. He'd gone out on patrols

with Kincaid ever since the younger man had reached the post. Lieutenant Kincaid invariably asked for him when entering Indian Territory on important or difficult assignments.

The examination had not been too stiff, and Morgan was confident he'd passed with flying colors. However, the report had not been received from Washington, and Lucy Kincaid awaited it anxiously before having a house party to celebrate.

It was dusk when Morgan rode into Neville, passing down the long, single main street filled with frozen slush. A half dozen saloons were already filled with prospective miners waiting for the spring rush into the Indian Territory. Time and time again Morgan had gone into the Territory on patrols to bring back these greedy prospectors who were intent on working the rivers and creeks in the forbidden land. Many of them had been found scalped, and White Tail, chief of the Brulé Sioux, had vigorously protested to Colonel Calendar on a half-dozen different occasions. But it wasn't easy to stop.

The riff-raff in Neville and other border towns wanted the Territory open for mining because the gold was said to be in the grass roots along the Squaw and the Broken Arrow. But those grass roots were nourished by the blood of white men, and had been for more than fifty years.

MORGAN watched a party of miners stagger out of one saloon and head down to Roland Kile's Alhambra. The big gambling house occupied one half of a block, and fronted on the main square. There was a side door in the alley, and this side door led to the beautiful apartments on the second floor, where Kile entertained wealthy ranchers, railroad men and occasional army officers who were not too much concerned about their reputations.

Two troopers, on leave, came out of a saloon as Morgan rode past, and one of them waved a hand to him, and then pointed toward the Alhambra significantly.

Morgan grimaced, dismounting a few doors from the big gambling house. Practically every man in the post seemed to know when Kincaid was on a spree, and Carr did not like it. In the beginning he'd sweated to keep the Lieutenant's secret because he knew Kincaid better than any man, and he knew Kincaid's wife. He knew what would happen if Kincaid were broken. Larry would end up in the gutter. Now he was not so far gone that he could not take hold of himself and get back on solid ground.

"There's not an officer at the post," Lieutenant O'Neil had said to Morgan privately, "who has the opportunities Kincaid has here. His work with White Tail and the other Sioux chieftains has undoubtedly prevented much bloodshed on the border. He's a natural mediator, and he's earned the respect of the Indians."

Morgan had noted this himself at the pow-wows Lieutenant Kincaid held with White Tail. The young West Pointer had picked up the language with amazing ease, and did not have to use an interpreter when conversing with the Sioux. He seemed to understand the Indian mind, and White Tail asked to speak with him whenever he had a grievance. During the past summer White Tail had had more and more grievances as toughs and miners slipped into the Territory.

A week before, Kincaid had intimated to Morgan that this problem had him baffled. "They know White Tail won't stand any more nonsense," he said. "They've been frightening the game out of the country and the Sioux live on the game. Any white man caught in the Territory without special permission to be there is liable to lose his hair."

"Plenty of gold in the Territory," Morgan had pointed out. "A man will go through hell for gold."

Kincaid shook his head. "One of White Tail's runners tells me they've spotted white men who were not mining. They were in the Territory to make trouble—groups of a dozen or two, heavily armed. They did a lot of buffalo hunting in the fall before the herds moved south. White Tail claims they helped to run the buffalo out of the country before his people had made their last big kill for the winter. You know what that means."

"Somebody wants the Territory opened," Morgan had said. "They want the Sioux pushed farther west or kicked out of the country altogether."

"Who?" Kincaid wanted to know, and Morgan couldn't answer.

"Maybe all these damned prospectors in

Neville, in Deadwood, and along the border," he'd offered.

"No," Kincaid stated quietly. "This thing is too well organized. There's one head behind it——one mind. It's known that if White Tail goes on the warpath in earnest this spring, the army will move in and take over. That means the Sioux will lose their Reservation and the whole Territory will be open to the prospectors, and all the worst element in the west."

"You figure White Tail knows that?" Morgan had asked the officer.

"He knows it," Kincaid stated, "and he's using all his influence to hold back his young bucks whenever these toughs move in and start trouble."

"Colonel Calendar know that?" Morgan wanted to know.

Kincaid shook his head gloomily. "The Colonel thinks White Tail is just another bloodthirsty Indian anxious to hit the war trail as soon as the prairie mud dries up."

Morgan Carr walked down the alley toward the side door of the Alhambra. Gusts of wind shot up the alley from the opposite direction, nearly tearing his hat from his head.

Stepping inside the dimly lit corridor, he walked toward the staircase just as a man started to descend. Two oil lamps in wall brackets provided a murky light on the staircase and in the little corridor. Morgan recognized the man coming down the steps as the hulking Jonas Bling, bouncer at the Alhambra. He had an idea Bling had seen him from one of the windows and had deliberately gone to the side door.

Quietly, Morgan waited for the man to descend. Bling was big in the chest and shoulders. He was dressed in a tight-fitting black suit with a seedy, black derby hat perched on the side of his huge head. A pair of tiny, smoky blue eyes were set on either side of a bulbous red nose. Ham-like hands dangled from the ends of his hooked, gorilla arms.

Bling paused at the bottom step, grinning a little, and acting as if the meeting were accidental. He had a rasping voice which Morgan had never liked.

"Now," Bling was saying, "no non-coms upstairs, friend."

Morgan smiled and stepped back. He was not as big as Bling, but he was no small man, and ten years in the regular army had put steel in his backbone, and iron in his arms and wrists.

"Since when, Jonas?" he asked coolly. He'd been upstairs before looking for Lieutenant Kincaid, and Bling knew that.

"Since we made the new rules," the bouncer chuckled. "Have your drink at the bar, Sergeant."

"Reckon I'll have it upstairs," Morgan told him. His mind was working rapidly. Bling hadn't thought up this thing in his own small mind. Roland Kile, owner of the Alhambra, and the biggest gambling man west of the Missouri, did the thinking for the house, and Kile must have given Bling his orders. Kile knew Sergeant Carr would be looking for Kincaid, and Kile did not want Kincaid to leave tonight.

"Sergeant," Bling rumbled, "I ain't lookin' for trouble with you."

"Step aside," Morgan told him. He was thinking of Lucy Kincaid, waiting for her husband to get back, hoping he would not get into trouble.

Bling was grinning broadly, rubbing his huge hands. "Now, Sergeant," he chuckled, "you ain't back at the post orderin' them kids around."

Upstairs, Morgan heard a man singing in a rich voice,

"We're marching off for Sitting Bull
And this is the way we go.
Forty miles a day on beans and hay
With the regular army——ho!"

PRIMLY, Morgan started forward, and Bling put out a huge hand to grasp his coat front. Morgan gripped the bouncer's wrist and his left hand, and the fingers with his right. Turning his back on Bling, he jerked the big man suddenly forward, pulling the arm over his own shoulder. He bent down then and gave a tremendous heave.

Bling yelled as his feet left the floor and moved toward the ceiling. Morgan released his grip when Bling was directly above him. The bouncer smashed against the door with a tremendous crash, knocking it open and landing out in the street.

He lay there, stunned by the force of the fall, and Morgan went up the stairs without looking back. A girl was standing at the top of the stairs, red shawl thrown around her shoulders, a diamond comb in her jet black hair. Flashing black eyes

stared down at him, the amusement showing in them.

Morgan Carr grinned back at her. He said ironically, "Reckon Jonas slipped, Maria."

White teeth flashed, and the laugh was soft, tinkling. Sergeant Carr felt his heart skip a beat. He'd met Maria Stevenson before at the Alhambra. Once she's assisted him in getting Lieutenant Kincaid out of the building after the officer had imbibed more than was good for him. Morgan Carr had come back to the main saloon to have a drink with her, and they'd met several times in the dance hall.

"I've watched Jonas Bling throw men out of the Alhambra for three months," the girl chuckled. "That's the first time I saw the tables reversed. It must be important."

Morgan smiled wryly. "Where is he?" he asked. He heard the door open behind Maria, and a man was purring softly.

"I presume you're ready to sing, Miss Stevenson."

Morgan, without seeing the man behind the girl, watched her face change. Some of the color departed, and her lips grew tense. She nodded, smiled again at Morgan, and turned away.

A small, frail man with light blond hair came over to the bannister as Morgan started up again. This man's eyes were doll-blue, his face a waxy color. He wore a trim, black claw-hammer coat with embroidered vest and neat black tie. A small gold chain dangled across the vest, and a small diamond glistened on the ring finger of his right hand. The hand resting on the bannister was white, fragile, like the hand of a woman. Morgan Carr could see the blue veins in it.

"Glad to see you, Sergeant," Roland Kile murmured. There was a fixed smile on his handsome face——the smile he always presented to the second floor customers.

"You know why I came," Morgan told him bluntly. "Where's Lieutenant Kincaid?"

Kile shrugged and slipped his hands in his pockets. "I do not keep track of my patrons," he stated softly. "If the Lieutenant is enjoying himself that is his business."

Morgan nodded. He had another thought then; it was something he should have considered a long while before. Where was Kincaid getting the money to frequent Kile's place? No man came away from the Alhambra with his pockets filled more than once. Kile had some of the best faro and monte dealers in the West working in his rooms, and it was even intimated in the Fort McDowell barracks that many of the innocent-looking ranchers, coming in to get hooked, were in reality Kile's sharpers waiting for suckers.

Down below, Morgan heard Jonas Bling stumbling through the door, snorting, muttering to himself.

"I am not very pleased," Roland Kile purred, "at the way you rough up my men, Sergeant. I must remind you that you are not handling buck privates."

"Bling get his orders from you?" Morgan asked.

"He usually does," Kile said.

"Tell him to throw me out," Morgan grinned, and he walked past the small man, pushing through the door beyond.

Blue tobacco smoke formed a haze through which the two huge glass chandeliers gleamed dully. This second floor room was very big. Heavy, red Brussels carpeting covered the floor. There were a dozen card tables, roulette wheels, and several faro layouts scattered about the room. A piano tinkled softly from one corner, providing incongruous background music for the steady hum of voices. Maria Stevenson stood near the piano, singing one of the popular songs of the day. She looked straight at Morgan as he came into the room, but her eyes revealed nothing.

II

AT A CARD TABLE against the right wall, Morgan spotted Larry Kincaid, legs sprawled, shoulders fitting into the curve of the chair. The Lieutenant's hat lay on the floor behind the chair, and his blond hair was awry. Morgan caught a glimpse of the classic, Grecian nose, and the laughing blue eyes. Again he felt that pang of regret that a man with the talents of Larry Kincaid should throw himself away in a place like the Alhambra.

Kincaid turned his head as Morgan came up to him and saluted. "Sergeant Carr," the Lieutenant chuckled, "always turning up when I'm losing."

A smooth-shaven, black-haired man in the garb of a gambler sat directly opposite Kincaid. There were two other men in the game, but the man with the black hair had most of the chips piled in front of him.

"Reckon it's time to get back to the post, Lieutenant," Morgan said quietly. Kincaid's eyes were blinking, and his face was flushed with drink.

"Our friend Blackstone," Lieutenant Kincaid grinned, "has been telling me that for the past hour." The Lieutenant nodded across the table toward the gambler, and Morgan studied this man thoughtfully. Blackstone's eyes were dark, enigmatic. His face was narrow, with an rather long chin. The mouth put him in mind of Maria Stevenson, singing softly over by the piano, watching them at the table. It was a rather wide mouth, the upper lip slightly curled.

Morgan heard the step behind him, and then Roland Kile was saying blandly. "I hope the Lieutenant appreciates the consideration of my men. It is rather unusual for a paid dealer to urge losing customers to leave."

The gambler, Blackstone, looked down at the pile of chips in front of him, a slight smile on his face. Morgan saw his fingers gripping the edge of the table go white from the pressure. There had been a veiled threat in Kile's words, and Blackstone hadn't missed it.

"I'm cleaned," Kincaid laughed. "Might just as well go back with the Sergeant, Kile." He got to his feet with an effort, and Morgan held his arm to steady him. Blackstone got up also, thumbs in his vest pockets, and Morgan glanced at him curiously. Usually, Kile's gamblers were anxious to keep Kincaid in the place as long as possible, and once Morgan had had to take a punch at one of them.

"Hope you enjoyed yourself, Lieutenant," Kile said. "Come again." He glanced at Blackstone for the second time, his baby-blue eyes glittering with hatred even as he smiled. The gambler picked up the deck of cards and shuffled them carefully, looking straight ahead of him.

Morgan Carr steered Larry Kincaid toward the door. He made a quick search of the big room, hoping that no other officers were present. There were plenty of tongues here which would wag in Neville, and another story of Lieutenant Kincaid's drunkenness would reach the post. It was almost unbelievable that Colonel Calendar had not heard the rumors and called Kincaid to his headquarters. The end, Morgan Carr told himself miserably, was not far off.

Maria Stevenson was still singing across the room, and some of the gamblers had paused to listen to her. The voice was soft, contralto, but it had a rich quality. She was staring at Blackstone and Roland Kile as they stood by the table Kincaid had just vacated, and Morgan thought he saw the fear in her eyes. He wondered why she worked for Kile.

"We're marching off for Sitting Bull," Larry Kincaid started to sing as Morgan helped him through the door. The Sergeant had picked up the Lieutenant's overcoat on a peg near the door, and he helped the officer into it.

Down below, at the foot of the stairs, Jonas Bling waited for them, the derby, now badly dented, pressed down firmly on his bullet head.

"Damn you, Sergeant," the bouncer grated. "Reckon that won't happen again."

"Get out of the way," Morgan told him.

Bling hesitated, jaw jutting out. He started to lift one of his hands, and then dropped it. Morgan pushed past him out into the street.

FLURRIES of snow were whirling down the alley, covering the dirty ice ruts in the gutter with the powdery, white substance. Instead of going down the alley and coming up on the main street from the rear, Morgan led Kincaid directly up the alley and toward the barber shop just beyond the entrance to the Alhambra. The snow blowing around them would conceal the fact that Kincaid was gloriously drunk. The gusts of wind killed the second verse of Kincaid's favorite song, *"Marching off for Sitting Bull,"* but Kincaid sang nevertheless with Morgan leading him patiently up the alley.

Heads bent to the wind, they crossed the front of the Alhambra saloon on the bottom floor, and Morgan glanced through the glass on the door. Ice had formed over most of the glass, but he could see through one hole, and he caught a glimpse of a swarthy, Indian face, greasy black hair

wet from the snow. The Indian, encased in red and black striped blanket stood at the bar, big shoulders hunched, a glass of amber-colored liquor clutched in his powerful fingers.

A crescent scar ran down the right cheek of the Indian from the eye to the corner of the mouth. Cruel black eyes were slitted, glittering like the eyes of a snake, as they watched the other drinkers at the bar.

"Damn it!" Morgan said without thinking, "Red Star's back, Lieutenant." He felt Kincaid's arm stiffen in his grasp, and Kincaid straightened up very suddenly to look into the saloon.

The movement startled Morgan as he had not suspected Kincaid to be sober enough even to take an interest in the renegade Red Star.

"Very strange," Kincaid muttered. "I thought he was up in Canada."

Morgan watched the big Brulé Sioux down his drink in one gulp without even changing his expression. Red Star, officially a member of White Tail's tribe, had skipped up into Canada after Sitting Bull had been chased across the boundary line. Red Star had led most of the warparties before the Sioux settled down on the Reservation. He'd refused to come in with the others, and Colonel Calendar feared the influence his return would have on the young bucks in White Tail's band. Red Star had a reputation as a warrior, and he hated the whites. He'd be ready to ride across the Reservation lines at the slightest provocation and spread havoc among the ranchers and nesters in the vicinity.

"White Tail," Morgan growled, "will have one hell of a time holding that chap, Lieutenant." He remembered then that Kincaid was drunk, and he pulled the younger man toward the barber shop. Kincaid had started to sing again.

THERE WAS a light in the barber shop and a customer in the chair, his face covered with lather. Sam Vane, the barber, nodded to Morgan, and then shook his head sadly. He pointed toward the curtain which separated the two little rooms. The curtain was green, heavy material, and behind it Vane had a tin bath tub.

"Been heatin' up some water," Vane said. "You'll find coffee on the stove, Sergeant." When the man in the chair tried to turn his head to see who had come in, Vane pressed it down and held the razor over the man's throat. The barber was a small man with silver-rimmed spectacles. Morgan had learned that Vane knew how to keep his mouth shut.

In the rear room, Morgan poured Kincaid a cup of coffee, and watched him drink it. Kincaid sat on a chair near the tub, legs sprawled. He grinned up at the Sergeant.

"I'm slightly drunk, Sergeant," he chuckled.

"You take a bath," Morgan told him, "and you'll feel better, Lieutenant." He helped the officer off with his boots, and then began to pour the water into the tin tub. Vane had had two huge kettles boiling on the stove in the rear. There were several buckets of cold water standing on the floor, and Morgan, looking at them, shivered. In sobering up Kincaid he always followed the same procedure—a warm bath, followed by a bucket or two of cold water on his back. The shock usually sobered up the drunken officer, and the hot coffee steadied him for the return to the post.

When Kincaid was sitting in the hot water, mumbling the words of his song, Morgan heard the door shut outside. The latch was drawn across the door, and then Vane stuck his head through the curtain. He winked at Morgan gravely, and the Sergeant went out.

"Saw him ridin' in," Vane stated. "When he went into the Alhambra I put the water on. He worse than usual?"

"He's drunk," Morgan scowled. "That's all there is to it."

Vane shook his head. "A damned pity," he said.

Morgan went back into the room and took the plug from the tin tub, letting the water run down under the barber shop. A mist from the hot water filled the room, and then Morgan picked up one of the cold water buckets and walked to the tub. Kincaid was sitting on the bottom of the tub, running his hands through his wet hair.

Deliberately, Morgan spilled the entire bucket over Kincaid's back. The officer let out a yell and struggled to his feet. He

got the second bucket over him before he could get straightened out.

Morgan Carr tossed him a towel and then sat down on a chair near the stove.

"Some day," Kincaid spluttered, "you'll kill me, Sergeant."

"Not me, Lieutenant," Morgan growled. "Drink." He poured more black coffee and had a cup himself while Kincaid was dressing. He could see from the blond man's eyes that the cold water had done the trick again. Kincaid would have a big head in the morning, but he could walk a straight line if necessary now.

"I'll have to thank you again, Sergeant," Larry Kincaid said quietly, "for sobering me up. If there's anything I can ever do for you—,"

"Think of your wife, Lieutenant," Morgan glowled, "the finest woman at the post."

"Yes," Kincaid murmured thoughtfully. He went to a mirror to comb his hair, and he had two cups of coffee when he came back. He looked at Morgan steadily. "What do you make of Red Star's return?" he asked suddenly.

Morgan shrugged. "Damned Indian's tired of Canada and wants to come back to his own people——maybe to start more trouble." He remembered the expeditions which had gone out to bring in Red Star before the peace treaty had been signed with White Tail. Usually Red Star had gathered about him the toughest warriors in the whole Sioux Nation. They'd lost the troopers in the maze of hills beyond the Broken Arrow, and Red Star had been able to boast of his exploits. Many men in blue had failed to come back after riding into one of Red Star's ambuscades.

"We can't touch him now," Kincaid was saying. "The Government has pardoned the whole tribe, if they'll agree to staying on the Reservation."

"He's off it now," Morgan observed.

Kincaid smiled. "You'll see him at the post tomorrow," he said, "to put his mark on a piece of paper which absolves him from all the damnable crimes he's committed during the past ten years. The Government can't hold trial for every Indian so all must be included in one treaty."

"You can't wipe out blood," Morgan Carr grated, "and Red Star's spilled too much of that—trooper blood."

"He didn't come back to the Broken Arrow country," Kincaid said, "to live peaceably. He knows how things are going down here and that the time is ripe for another big uprising. He wants to be in on that."

"How in hell would he know?" Morgan asked.

"He's been told," Kincaid smiled as he sipped his coffee. He didn't offer any more on the subject.

IT WAS SNOWING steadily when they rode back to the post, following the line of telegraph poles which stretched from Neville to Fort McDowell. Several inches of snow lay on the ground, and it was still falling steadily. Morgan watched each pole looming up out of the darkness. In blizzard weather those poles had saved many a trooper from wandering off into the open plain.

Kincaid had lapsed into silence, and he rode with his head down, against the wind and snow, letting the horse pick its own way through the drifts. Morgan watched the Lieutenant out of the corner of his eyes.

He wondered whether Larry Kincaid was pondering over the same questions which puzzled him. What had brought Red Star back from Canada? Why had Blackstone, the gambler, tried to get the Lieutenant out of the Alhambra before he became too drunk? What was Maria Stevenson, a talented girl, doing at the Alhambra? Morgan had known gambling house women before, and Maria was not one of them.

They were half way to the post, and Morgan was peering through the snow toward the next telegraph pole, when he saw the solitary rider dashing toward them from the side of the road. A gun winked through the snow, followed immediately by the roar. Morgan felt the slug cut through his overcoat.

Larry Kincaid yelled as the rider shot past them. His horse had jumped with the shot, nearly unseating the Lieutenant, but Kincaid was fumbling with his sabre, trying to bring it out of the scabbard.

Morgan managed to slip his Spencer Repeater from the saddle holster, but the killer had already disappeared into the snow. He could hear the other horse

pounding toward Neville, and he fired one shot in the general direction.

"See him?" Kincaid asked grimly.

"Moving too fast," Morgan growled. "No use following him in this kind of weather."

"Probably after our wallets," Kincaid observed. "Or," he added thoughtfully, "our lives."

"Reckon no footpad's fool enough to go after two cavalrymen," Morgan said. "Kind of a big job for one man."

"Know any reason why somebody should try to kill you, Sergeant?" Lieutenant Kincaid wanted to know.

"I threw Jonas Bling out of the house," Morgan grinned. "Only that wasn't Jonas riding that horse. This chap was a smaller man."

"Probably we'll never know who," Kincaid said. He rode along for a few moments in silence, head down against the snow again. He said then, "Sergeant, I'd advise you not to come after me any more if you hear I'm in the Alhambra."

"Now—," Morgan started to say.

"I'll make that an order," Kincaid interrupted. "I don't want a patrol to find you lying in the snow some morning with a bullet in your back."

Morgan Carr let that sink in, realizing its implications. "You mean that chap tried to murder me because I got you out of the Alhambra?" he asked slowly.

"I'm not sure," Kincaid said, "but I'm taking no chances."

"Reckon you'd better stay out of the Alhambra then, Lieutenant," Morgan told him grimly.

"I'll be there," Kincaid observed, "on Saturday night, and I'll be drunker than tonight. I'll arrange for you to stay at the fort that night."

Morgan pulled up his horse abruptly. "Sooner or later, Lieutenant," he snapped, "you'll be cashiered."

"I'll take that chance," Kincaid told him without looking back.

MORGAN entered Company B barracks at nine o'clock that night after having watched Larry Kincaid go into his own quarters on Officers' Row. They'd gone past the sentry on guard without any trouble and they'd met no one as they crossed the parade grounds.

Several card games were going on in the barracks, and the pot belly stove in the center of the room was red hot. Morgan stripped off his overcoat and boots. He was walking toward the stove when a red-haired man called softly from one of the bunks,

"Bring him back, Sergeant?"

Morgan turned around slowly, recognizing that voice, and not liking the tone. Other men at the card tables looked up and some of them grinned.

"Who, Shannon?" Morgan asked the red-head blandly.

"Now, hell," Corporal Shannon chuckled, sitting up and clasping big hands, "this whole post knows why you go into Neville, Sergeant." He added coolly, "Must be kind o' nice havin' Mrs. Kincaid so sweet on you, Sergeant."

Morgan had been walking toward the man, and he was two strides away when the Corporal mentioned Mrs. Kincaid. He covered those two strides in one long leap and grasped Shannon by the shirt front, yanking him to his feet.

"Get him, Sergeant," a trooper yelled.

Shannon cursed and tried to break away, but Morgan rammed him against the bunk and swung his right fist, hitting the red-head full on the jaw. Shannon went down on his knees, but came up, lunging forward, grappling for Morgan's waist, knocking him back against one of the card tables. The table went over, spilling cards and chips all over the floor.

Regaining his balance, Morgan braced himself and swung deliberately for Shannon's face. He started to move forward, hitting out with both hands, taking blows in the face, but never stopping.

He'd never liked Shannon, and there had been words before with the stocky red-head, but tonight was the first time the Corporal had brought in Mrs. Kincaid's name.

Shannon's greenish eyes flamed with hatred as he tried to brace himself against Morgan's attack. He slashed at Morgan's face with a big left fist, hitting the Sergeant in the mouth and drawing blood. Morgan knocked him back against the wall of the barracks with a fusillade of punches. He smashed Shannon's nose with one swing and heard the bone crackle as the bridge went. Shannon dropped to the floor with

a groan and sat there, the blood pouring from both nostrils.

"I'll remember this, Sergeant," he panted. "I'll pay you back if it takes a hundred years."

"Take him over to the hospital," Morgan ordered one of the troopers. "Have that nose fixed up."

A veteran trooper by the name of Buckman came over after Shannon had left, and Morgan was standing over a wash basin, bathing his bruised knuckles. "That Shannon's a bad one, Sergeant," Buckman observed. "He'll do you if he can."

"If he can," Morgan said, "he's damned welcome."

"There are other ways," Buckman stated, "dirty ways."

"I've seen most of them," Morgan Carr said. He decided mentally that he'd have to watch Corporal Shannon. The redhead had been a discontented trooper for a long while. He wanted his third stripe and because it had not been given to him he'd been stirring up trouble in the barracks. Shannon's enlistment had two more years to go, and that could be a long time when a man once decided that the cavalry was not for him.

III

IN THE MORNING Red Star rode into the post on a big chestnut horse. The chestnut had once been an army horse, but the brand had been blotched out crudely. It was a direct affront to the groups of tense cavalrymen watching the big Indian ride past the company barracks, across the parade grounds, and dismount in front of headquarters building.

Red Star wore his blanket close up around his face, and a single eagle feather dangled from his black hair. His beady black eyes swept the fort enclosure insolently, and he went up the wooden steps of headquarters, head erect, like a conqueror.

Morgan saw a trooper, white-faced, trembling, standing outside the sutler's office, watching Red Star.

"That's Johnny Brand," Buckman said softly. "His brother, Ed, was captured by Red Star's bucks. They found Ed staked out on the plains, his belly burned out, scalped while he was still alive!"

Morgan watched the Indian grimly as Lieutenant Lawrence Kincaid let him in to the building. Kincaid was a trifle pale this morning, but he seemed to have a firm grip on himself.

"Hell of a thing," Trooper Buckman stated, "that a devil like Red Star can be pardoned."

"The government offered to pardon every Sioux who came in to the post," Morgan muttered. "They made no exceptions."

"They didn't know Red Star," Buckman growled. "There'll be trouble on the Reservation from now on. Once the snow melts he'll be ridin' off with a lot o' young bucks who never knew what war was. They'll start by slaughterin' steers on the ranches, an' they'll end up with humans."

A half hour after he'd gone in, Red Star came out, the same arrogant expression on his face. He looked at Morgan disdainfully as he rode past the barracks again out of the gate.

Lieutenant Kincaid took out a patrol of twelve men later in the morning, and Morgan accompanied him. They skirted the territory south of Neville, and then crossed the Reservation boundary, moving up along the frozen Squaw River. A white blanket of snow covered the ground, and the patrol had to move slowly, the horses picking their way with care.

Mid-day camp was made in an inlet off the Squaw. The horses were picketed and two fires started. Morgan Carr sniffed the heavy smell of coffee and bacon in the chill winter air. He walked down to the river to chop a hole in the ice, and then stopped to watch three horsemen riding swiftly down the opposite bank of the frozen river.

Lieutenant Kincaid scrambled down the the little slope to Morgan's side, and they watched the riders carefully.

"Chap on the inside," Morgan said tersely, "is Red Star. They're heading for the Broken Arrow and White Tail's camp."

"Those other two," Kincaid murmured, "don't ride like Indians."

"They're not Indians," Morgan told him grimly. "They're white men." Even as he spoke, he saw Red Star turn in the saddle and stare toward the encampment in the inlet. The big Indian lifted his rifle and brandished it silently, a defiant gesture.

"I'd like to get a look at those chaps

with him," Lieutenant Kincaid said softly.

Morgan shook his head. Crossing the Squaw, even in mid-winter, was a dangerous undertaking. Ice which seemed two feet thick suddenly gave way, dropping horse and rider into the deadly waters. A swift current beneath the ice, which could sweep a man into oblivion, made it all the more hazardous. A trooper had died that way a month before, and all patrols had standing orders not to cross the Squaw, except on foot.

"Red Star's up to something," Morgan said slowly. "I'd give my right arm to know what it was."

"We'll find out soon enough," Kincaid stated.

"After a lot of good men die," Morgan growled. "After another Sioux uprising in the spring."

Lieutenant Kincaid watched the three fleeing figures thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure Red Star, or his backers, will wait till the spring," he remarked quietly.

Morgan stared at the Lieutenant. "We never saw a Sioux warparty go out with snow on the ground," he said. "They can't move fast enough, and they're not sure of game along the way."

"They can bring along plenty of pemmican," Kincaid observed, "and they know we won't be expecting them to leave the Reservation in mid-winter. They'll have the jump on us, and they can do plenty of damage along the border before we can get an expedition out."

Morgan rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "By the time the troopers get out," he said, "the warparty can be back in the Reservation, looking as innocent as all hell."

"Which means," Kincaid told him, "that the Indian Bureau decides to punish the Sioux by squeezing them into a smaller Reservation, or splitting them up into bands and shifting them to other Reservations to the south."

"That'll open up the Territory for mining," Morgan growled. "All these toughs in Neville will shoot across the border like a swarm of bees."

"That seems to be the plan," Kincaid smiled coldly.

"Whose plan?" Morgan asked him.

Kincaid shrugged. "We hope to find out," he said.

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK the next evening Morgan walked into Sam Vane's barber shop in Neville. He'd come in primarily to make a few purchases, but, walking past the Alhambra, he knew there was another reason. He'd been thinking of Maria Stevenson for days, wondering about the girl. There was little doubt that Roland Kile had a hold on her——a hold which a man of Kile's nature would never relinquish.

Sam Vane shaved him and offered the little news, most of which Morgan already knew.

"Damn town seems to be fillin' up," Vane said. "Never saw the like of it in mid-winter. Lot o' rumors goin' around."

"Concerning the Reservation?" Morgan asked him quietly.

Vane bobbed his head several times. "Everybody figures the Sioux will be gettin' kicked out by the spring, an' they want to be the first ones across the line to stake claims along the Broken Arrow."

"Why should the Sioux be taken off the Reservation?" Morgan wanted to know.

Vane shrugged. "That's the talk, friend," he grinned. "More than that you'll have to git from Roland Kile himself. Kile's the man knows which way the wind blows in Neville."

Morgan smiled into the fly-specked mirror. Vane was indirectly saying that the rumors concerning the Reservation had emanated from the Alhambra, and Vane was usually right in his conjectures.

"Kile," Morgan murmured, "is a pretty shrewd man."

"Shrewd," Vane agreed, "an' damned dangerous to cross." He paused as he lathered Morgan's face, and he spat into the spittoon. "Hear you threw Jonas Bling out in the street the other night."

"He got in my way," Morgan said.

"Reckon Kile didn't like that," Vane observed. "Better walk careful, Sergeant."

Morgan Carr stepped from the barber shop, walked fifteen steps, and entered the Alhambra Saloon on the ground floor. He grinned, knowing that Sam Vane was watching him from his window, shaking his head in disgust.

Despite the early hour, the Alhambra was already well filled. Morgan spotted Blackstone, the gambler, handling a faro layout at a table across the room. Black-

stone saw him immediately, stared straight into Morgan's eyes, and then looked away.

Sergeant Morgan Carr was positive Blackstone was trying to warn him of something. He was more sure of this fifteen minutes later when the gambler left his table and strolled to the bar for a drink. The thin-faced man in black edged up to Morgan's elbow, and then looked into the mirror.

Morgan glanced into the glass also, and saw Roland Kile coming toward him from the stairway to the second floor. Kile was walking fast as if he intended to break something up.

Blackstone downed his drink, without saying a word, or looking at Morgan. He returned to his table, leisurely.

"Good evening, Sergeant," Kile greeted, the same, waxy smile on his pink and white face. Morgan nodded. He ordered another glass of beer.

"Did you get the Lieutenant back without any trouble?" Kile asked.

"No thanks to you," Morgan told him coolly. He saw Corporal Shannon coming through the door from the street, a scarf around his neck, his nose patched with adhesive tape. The red-head's green eyes made a quick survey of the room and came to a stop on Morgan Carr's face. He smiled grimly, and then walked on to the other end of the bar.

"I'd hate to see Lieutenant Kincaid get in trouble," Kile was saying smoothly. "If he's kicked out of the service we lose a good customer. Kincaid is a spender."

"So you sell him cheap whiskey," Morgan grated, "and you get him blind drunk so he can't find his way back to the post."

"You can't stop a man from drinking," Kile pointed out. "That would be an insult."

"Let it go," Morgan said bitterly. He was thinking of Kincaid's remark that he'd be stone drunk on Saturday night. This was Friday. Liquor already had a firm hold on the Lieutenant, and it would be hard to break. Kile was responsible for that.

Kile passed on, and Morgan strolled over to Blackstone's faro table. He watched the players for a few moments, but he kept his eyes on Roland Kile, moving about the room, greeting customers.

Jonas Bling came in, and Kile spoke a few words to Bling. The bouncer immediately pushed his way through the crowd and took a position a few feet behind Blackstone. The gesture was very evident. Bling had been ordered to see that the gambler did not pass a message to Morgan Carr.

Smiling to himself, Morgan went back to the bar, pausing to speak with a trooper who had just come in. Looking over this man's shoulder, he saw Kile murmur something to Corporal Shannon at the other end of the room. Shannon went through a side door directly off the bar, and Kile followed him a few minutes later.

MORGAN CARR'S eyes widened slightly. He hadn't been aware of the fact that Shannon and Kile were acquainted, or intimate enough to have private conferences. He thought of Trooper Buckman's statement. Corporal Shannon was a discontented cavalryman, and as such would bear watching.

Jonas Bling continued to linger behind Blackstone, watching him warily, pretending that he was interested in the game. The bouncer's crude efforts at spying were ludicrous, but Blackstone gave him no further notice.

Once when Morgan paid his bill at the bar and acted as if he were going to leave, Blackstone looked across at him steadily. Accidentally, sliding a card from his box, he dropped it to the floor near Bling's boot, and when the bouncer looked down at it, Blackstone shook his head emphatically at Morgan.

Puzzled, Morgan picked out an empty chair in a poker game, and took a few hands. He was positive now Blackstone wanted to flash him a message, and he would do it as soon as Bling's attention could be diverted.

Morgan scratched his chin thoughtfully. A faded little man with a white beard slouched by the table at which Morgan sat. He watched the bartenders ladling out the drinks, and Morgan could see his eyes water. The little man was shabbily dressed in a huge moth-eaten buffalo coat. When he'd taken a position along the wall, still watching the bartenders, Morgan excused himself at his table and walked over to the little man.

"Like a drink, Jack?" the Sergeant asked him.

"Hell," the little man grinned. "Been waitin' all night, soldier."

Morgan handed him a greenback. "Step outside the door and yell 'fire'," he smiled. "Make it as loud as you can."

The shabby little man gulped. "Fire?" he mumbled.

"It's a joke," Morgan told him. "You can duck down the alley and come in the side door."

The small man pulled at his beard and looked at the greenback. "Reckon I'll lose my damn ears if they catch me," he chuckled, "but it's worth it, friend." Pocketing the bill, he ambled toward the door, and Morgan returned to his table.

Less than a minute later, Morgan heard the loud whoop just outside the door.

"Fire! Fire!" the little man howled. "Whole damn town's burnin' up!"

The Alhambra bar emptied miraculously. A card table went over in the wild rush for the door. Jonas Bling knocked over two men, and was the third man into the street.

Morgan Carr stepped over to Blackstone's empty faro layout. "What's up?"

Blackstone grinned at him. "Mighty clever, Sergeant," he chuckled. He pulled Morgan back up against the wall as Roland Kile and Corporal Shannon raced out of the side room and bolted for the door. Men were still pouring out into the street. Several of them had taken up the cry, "Fire! Fire!" even though no fire was apparent.

"Don't try to return to the post alone tonight," Blackstone said quietly. "You'll never make it, Sergeant."

Morgan's lips tightened. "I had a shot thrown at me the other night," he grated.

"There'll be more," Blackstone told him, "until you get it. They have you set up tonight."

"Who?" Morgan asked him grimly.

"Get out that side door," Blackstone said quickly. "Kile will be in here any moment."

Morgan stepped out the door, bumping into the white-bearded little man just coming in.

"They'll kill me!" he was panting.

Morgan grinned and stepped around to the front of the building. The crowd was trampling down the snow in front of the Alhambra. They were looking in all directions, and a man was yelling for "buckets." A drunk had inadvertently stuffed a lighted cigar in his coat pocket and it was starting to smolder while he jumped around, howling with pain.

Roland Kile, who had been standing near the door, suddenly turned and went inside. He came out a moment later, searching through the crowd until he'd spotted Morgan. Bling, walking back toward the door, saw Kile's tense face and he pulled up, a sheepish grin on his face.

Morgan, going back through the door with the rest of the crowd, caught part of the tongue-lashing Kile handed the big bouncer.

"Hell," Bling was grumbling, "he come outside, too."

Kile stared at Morgan suspiciously as the Sergeant moved over to his chair at the poker table and sat down again. The crowd drifted back inside, shivering from the cold, cursing at the practical joker who had drawn them outside. At the bar a little man with a beard huddled over a glass of liquor, looking neither to the right nor left.

Jonas Bling took up his watch near Blackstone's layout, and Kile went up the stairs to the second floor. Looking up, Morgan saw Maria Stevenson standing at the head of the stairs, watching him intently. He nodded his head slightly, indicating that he had been informed, and it was only then that he realized he'd instinctively connected Blackstone and the girl in this little act.

SHE returned the nod and smiled at him, disappearing a moment later. Morgan turned back to his cards, looking at them and not seeing them. He had to admit that it was a strange thing, this linking the professional gambler to Kile's singer, but he knew that his intuition had been correct. Maria Stevenson had confirmed that.

He had another, and less pleasant, thought then, something that hit him inside. Was it possible that the two were man and wife? For business reasons they could be posing as single individuals, fooling even Kile, who would never hire a married woman to sing for his patrons.

This thought gnawed at Morgan's heart for the next half hour, and he quit the poker game in disgust, having taken little

interest in it. He told himself he was a fool thinking of Maria in that connection. He was not even sure of his commission, and knowing the living conditions of the married couples in the enlisted men's quarters, he knew he would never bring a woman to the post while he was still a non-com.

"Somebody step on your corn, soldier?" one of the players at the table asked him softly.

"Hell," Morgan muttered. He buttoned up his overcoat and went out into the night, walking past Vane's barber shop, and into the stable where the post troopers usually left their mounts.

A man, who had been standing on the next corner, suddenly skipped out of sight, and Morgan remembered Blackstone's warning. Saddling up inside, he contemplated making a run for it anyway with his Colt revolver in his hand.

It was a foolish thought and he knew it—something which had been born from this myth he'd built up around Blackstone and Maria Stevenson. Two other troopers were at the far end of the table, chatting with the hostler. Morgan waited until several more came in, and he rode out with them. There were six in the party which headed back for Fort McDowell.

Morgan listened to the talk, taking no part in it. The temperature had dropped to sub-zero again, and the horses' hoofs clicked on the hard ice of the road. A crescent moon hung high in the sky, lighting up the road, revealing the line of telegraph poles which disappeared over the next summit.

FOUR RIDERS wheeled into sight on the ridge ahead of them, and the lead trooper pulled up suddenly. The other party was less than seventy-five yards away, but they could be seen plainly.

"Who in hell are they?" a trooper asked.

"We'll find out," Morgan growled. He spurred his horse ahead, at the same time drawing his Colt gun. The troopers followed him at a sharp trot.

The four men on the ridge turned and fled down the other side, riding very hard. "They were up to somethin'," one trooper yelled. "We'll give it to 'em."

The riders had turned off the road and were fleeing across the open plain. One of them turned in the saddle and fired a shot back at them. Morgan lifted his Colt and squeezed the trigger twice. He saw the rear rider slump in the saddle.

The other three opened fire on the charging troopers, and Morgan felt one bullet graze his cheek. A second struck the black horse he was riding, and he felt the animal shiver, and stumble.

Clearing his boots from the stirrups, Morgan was ready when the black went down. He tried to land on his feet, and succeeded partially. The momentum was so much that it propelled him forward into a bank of hard snow. He went over, striking his left shoulder and the left side of his face, bruising his face badly. He sat there, stunned, and two of the troopers pulled up to look after him.

The four riders up ahead had raced down into a cut in the hills, and the troopers gave up the chase. Morgan was helped to his feet and assisted up behind another trooper.

"Who do you figure they were, Sergeant?" a trooper asked him.

"They didn't want to be caught," Morgan grated. "We know that much." There was little doubt in his mind that the four riders had been waiting for him, and that they would have shot him down had he been alone. Blackstone's warning had saved his life.

Back at the post, Morgan made a report to Lieutenant Kincaid, telling him of Blackstone's aid in the matter. The officer smiled grimly. "You'll have to stay out of Neville, Sergeant," he stated. "Two attempts have been made on your life. They won't fail the third time."

"Reckon I'll be ready for them from now on," Morgan said quietly.

Kincaid shook his head. "For the present, Sergeant," he ordered, "you are to remain at the post. Something is going to break within a few days. I'm sure of that."

Morgan studied the officer thoughtfully. Kincaid always seemed to be holding something back. Was he playing another game? It made it all the more preposterous that he should be getting drunk and wasting his time at the Alhambra. The drunkenness was no sham. On occasions Kincaid had been so bad that Morgan had to literally carry him to Sam Vane's shop.

"Tomorrow," Morgan said, "is Saturday, Lieutenant."

Kincaid nodded and smiled. "I have arranged for you to leave for Harrison in the morning and pick up a half-dozen horses at the Anchor ranch. You will take two men with you."

Morgan frowned. "You figure on going to Neville tomorrow, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I might be," Kincaid smiled. "Don't worry about it."

Morgan Carr went back to the barracks, still frowning. Kincaid had deliberately sent him away from the post so that he could not interfere this time. When a man began to plan his sprees ahead it meant that he was pretty badly off.

Corporal Shannon came into the Company B barracks an hour later. He went straight to his bunk after sending a few furtive glances in Morgan's direction. The Sergeant sat on a bench near the pot belly stove, cleaning his Spencer rifle. He noticed a red welt on Shannon's right cheek, which could have been caused by the crease of a bullet, or an accidental fall. Shannon tried to hide that cheek.

"Have a hell of a time shaving tomorrow," Morgan called softly. "One of the women at the Alhambra bite you?"

"Hell with you," Shannon said.

"Watch the company you keep, Red," Morgan stated grimly. "You'll end up in the guard house."

"I'll see you in the morgue," Shannon grated.

"Now," Morgan Carr told him slowly, "someone damn near put me there tonight. When I find out who it was, I'll pay that back."

Shannon peeled off his boots, saying nothing further on the subject. Morgan watched the red-head out of the corner of his eyes. Shannon's talk with Roland Kile could mean anything and it could mean nothing.

IV

IN THE MORNING Morgan rode out with two troopers, heading south toward Harrison and the Anchor ranch. It was eighteen miles to Harrison, which meant a full day would be consumed bringing in the horses purchased by the post.

They had trouble in the afternoon, returning with the small herd. Six miles from the Anchor ranch they ran into a snow flurry and had to hole up for three hours in a narrow canyon. It was nearly ten o'clock when Morgan reached the post with his two fagged-out troopers and six weary horses.

He saw the light shining in Kincaid's house across the parade grounds, and he contemplated going over to see whether Kincaid had gotten back.

He was rubbing down his horse in the stables when Trooper Buckman came in, face glum. He sat down on a box and watched Morgan grimly.

"What happened?" the Sergeant asked quickly.

"Kincaid," Buckman scowled. "Come in an hour ago."

Morgan grimaced. "How?" he asked.

"Two sides to the wind," Buckman said, "an' he run plumb into Colonel Calendar. He's singin' that damned song about 'Sittin' Bull',"

"That's it," Morgan said dully. "He's finished."

"He'll be cashiered," Buckman agreed. "They'll take that bar off his shoulder an' put him in the barracks. They might kick him out of the army altogether."

Morgan left the stable and crossed the parade grounds to the Officers' quarters. He knocked on Lucy Kincaid's door and waited. Inside he could hear Larry Kincaid singing at the top of his voice. *"We're marching off for Sitting Bull."*

Lucy Kincaid opened the door and the yellow lamplight fell on Morgan's face.

"How is he?" the Sergeant asked quietly. He saw the tears in the woman's eyes.

"They—they caught him, Sergeant," she half-sobbed.

"I heard it," Morgan muttered.

"Lieutenant O'Neil tried to get him over here," Mrs. Kincaid said dully, "but Larry insisted on singing his song for Colonel Calendar. He rode directly up to headquarters."

"The Colonel might go easy on him," Morgan tried to console her. "He's been invaluable working with the Sioux." In his heart, however, he knew the commanding officer had no alternative.

Drunkenness was inexcusable in an officer. It was bad for the morale of the men.

Over at "B" barracks, Trooper Buckman had more news. "Corporal Shannon wasn't in for 'retreat,'" the trooper stated.

Morgan stared at him. "Deserted?" he asked.

"Wouldn't be surprised," Buckman said. "Shannon ain't liked it too much around here."

Morgan nodded. He'd been expecting Shannon to pull out any day. A detail would be sent out to search for him, but in the dead of winter the search should not be too thorough, and the Corporal would probably put plenty of space between himself and the post.

"Good riddance," Buckman said, "to bad rubbish, Sergeant."

Morgan Carr didn't say anything. He had the feeling that he wasn't quite finished with the tough Corporal Shannon.

In the morning the news spread through the fort that Lieutenant Lawrence Kincaid had been dishonorably discharged from the service.

Stunned, Morgan hurried over to the Kincaid house. He found a dazed Lucy Kincaid. The ex-Lieutenant was still over at headquarters.

"We'll have to go back east," Lucy said quietly. "Larry can find some other type of work."

Morgan didn't say anything to that. Both of them knew how slim were the prospects of a dishonorably-discharged officer. The post could furnish no references to a man dismissed because of drunkenness.

In the afternoon Lawrence Kincaid rode out of the post on a borrowed horse, and he went alone, taking the road for Neville.

Morgan Carr watched him from "B" stables. He heard Trooper Buckman state grimly: "Reckon he's gonna finish up that drunk, Sergeant."

Morgan spent a miserable afternoon, wondering whether he should go into Neville after the Lieutenant. With Kincaid out of the army the harm was already done, and anything which happened now would be incidental.

He saw Lucy Kincaid walking down the boardwalk past Officers' Row. She was walking briskly, and he was surprised. When she passed him she nodded and smiled, further adding to Morgan's perplexity. There was a peculiar expression on the woman's face, but she was not downcast, and this change had occurred since the morning.

"Figuring on riding into Neville," Morgan said. "I was wondering—,"

"Don't bother about the Lieutenant," Mrs. Kincaid said quietly. "He'll be all right."

She passed on quickly, leaving Morgan staring after her. He listened to the flag flapping from the fifty-foot pole in the center of the parade grounds, and then he went back to the mess hall. At "retreat" Corporal Shannon was still missing.

MORGAN hit the bunk early that night, having heard nothing of Kincaid all afternoon. He didn't sleep well, and he bounced up fully awake when "Assembly" sounded a little after midnight.

Lamps were quickly lighted in the barracks and men struggled into breeches and boots. An orderly bounced into "B" barracks, and shouted, "Company B—all out!"

Morgan strapped on his saber and rushed for the door, bumping into a sleepy Trooper Buckman.

"What in hell's up!" Buckman grumbled. "We should be gettin' five more hours' sleep."

"We'll find out," Morgan said. He had the feeling that this was it—the first jump of the Sioux from the Reservation. He remembered Kincaid's words—if the Sioux were smart they would strike in the dead of winter.

Lanterns flitted back and forth in front of the stables as Morgan ran toward "B" stables. Company K and Company L were also out. Across the parade grounds Officers' Row was lit up as if for a ball.

Hurrying men raced past Morgan, some of them slipping and falling on the thin coating of ice which covered everything. It was bitterly cold, but clear tonight with that same crescent moon. Morgan could feel the cold bite into his chest. He heard Captain Drake, already on the parade grounds, issuing orders crisply. Several Lieutenants, mounted, waited nearby. Orderlies were rushing back and forth across the grounds, and a man was repeating:

"Company L—line up—line up."

"B" Company raced out of the stables leading their mounts and lined up in position on the parade grounds. The men of Companies L and K were scrambling into position.

Morgan waited up near the head of Company B. His head had cleared now, and he was thinking rapidly. Undoubtedly, this was Sioux trouble, something which Red Star had started. Very possibly, the big Indian was already across the Reservation boundary, spreading havoc among the isolated ranches on the other side.

The bugler played "Boots and Saddles," and the McClellans creaked as one hundred and twenty-five men hit the saddle as one. Several horses broke out of line, but were quickly forced back into position. The three companies waited for orders, guidons fluttering at the head of each troop.

Morgan saw a Lieutenant ride up to Captain Drake and say something to him. The Lieutenant's figure was strangely familiar. Morgan Carr gulped and rubbed his eyes.

"Why damn it!" Trooper Buckman gasped. "That—that's—"

Morgan heard the next order which Captain Drake issued, and it was a strange one. They were to leave sabers behind!

"Night attack," Buckman chuckled. "Them sabers make too damned much noise."

The Lieutenant, who had made the suggestion to Captain Drake, rode over to Company B and took his position at the head. He said, without looking around: "Good evening, Sergeant."

"Lieutenant Kincaid!" Morgan muttered. "How in—?"

"Ready to move," Kincaid said. He called back over his shoulder, "Column left—by fours!"

Riders had already skirted down the long lines, picking up sabers and carrying them back to barracks. The three companies were ready to ride.

Captain Drake paused to speak with Colonel Calendar as the commanding officer rode up to him. Drake, Morgan could see, was in command of the expedition. The three companies wheeled out through the main gates in columns of four, Company "B" at the head.

Lieutenant Kincaid didn't speak until they were a half-mile from the post. Morgan Carr rode a few feet behind him, vainly trying to put the pieces together, Kincaid had been discharged from the service, and yet he was leading Company B tonight on a seemingly important mission.

"All right, Sergeant," Kincaid called suddenly.

MORGAN RODE UP. They had left the Neville road and were going across open country, breaking their way through several inches of frozen snow, leaving the line of telegraph poles far behind them.

"We're riding after Red Star," Kincaid said. "He's camped on the Reservation border in a little gully a mile north of Owl Creek. He has probably one hundred warriors—some of them crazy young bucks he's drawn away from White Tail's band, and the rest seasoned fighters he brought back with him from Canada."

Morgan took a deep breath. "They going over the border?" he asked.

"At dawn," Kincaid said. "They're striking in the direction of Harrison, and they'll hit at a dozen ranches in between."

"Lot of nesters in between, too," Morgan growled. "None of them will be expecting a raid at this time of year."

"Red Star doesn't know it," Kincaid went on grimly, "but he's only a pawn in this game. He's calculated to start the fireworks and gather a little plunder for himself. When his raid's over, the real business begins."

"How—?" Morgan started to ask.

"Every post around the Reservation," Kincaid stated, "will get orders to move in on White Tail because he'll be responsible in the eyes of the Government. Washington makes no distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Indians. They're all Indians, and as such they'll have to be punished for Red Star's raid."

"Pretty tough on White Tail," Morgan said. "He's been toeing the mark all the way."

"The Sioux will probably be kicked off the Reservation," Kincaid went on, "and the territory opened for mining, and gambling, which our friend wants."

"Kile?" Morgan asked.

LIEUTENANT KINCAID nodded, "Roland Kile," he said tersely. "He's the chap brought Red Star and his bucks back from Canada. He's the man behind all this trouble in the Reservation. His toughs were going across the border and causing trouble with the Sioux. He wants the Territory opened."

"Kile won't do any mining," Morgan pointed out.

"No," Kincaid snapped. "He sits back and lets the others do the dirty work. Then he opens a gambling house in every town and hamlet established in the Reservation, and he takes back probably seventy-five per cent of the gold dug from the ground."

Morgan Carr gulped. "Kile tell you all this?" he asked weakly.

"I found it out," Kincaid said quietly, "this afternoon. I went back to Neville with the whole town knowing that I'd been cashiered. I let Kile know how bitterly I felt about the whole business. I 'damned' the army and every man in it. Then I started 'damning' Washington. I had a few drinks in me, but I kept my ears open the way I'd kept them open for months while getting drunk in the Alhambra."

"You—you were spying on Kile while you were getting drunk?"

Kincaid nodded. "Colonel Calendar suspected Kile from the beginning and we planned to trap him. The Colonel realized Kile would like me out of the army because I was the friend of White Tail and I was able to conciliate him when things got pretty bad. I had instructions to spend a lot of time at the Alhambra, lose a lot of money and get into Kile's debt. Then when I was kicked from the army I would be open for a proposition from Kile."

"Then you weren't drunk?" Morgan asked, bewildered. "Damn it, Lieutenant, I smelled—"

"I was drunk," Kincaid smiled, "but not always as badly as I pretended."

"Did Kile make a proposition today?" Morgan wanted to know.

"He didn't have to," Kincaid explained. "I heard enough from the talk of Jonas Bling and Corporal Shannon to know what was going on."

"Shannon was in with Kile all the while," Morgan growled. "Where in hell is he now?"

"Hiding out at the Alhambra," Kincaid said. "Kile needed him to keep an eye on me and conditions at the post. That was the reason I could not let my wife in on the secret. Shannon was watching her closely, and her reactions to my drunkenness had to be authentic."

"Kile is the smoothest devil in the west," Morgan said tersely.

"He'll hang for this business," Kincaid stated. "We have orders to bring him in after we've knocked out Red Star's band."

Morgan Carr listened to the sodden clumping of the column of riders behind him. Glancing back over his shoulder he could see them moving up over a ridge, four abreast, riding in close formation. Up ahead, flankers were spreading out in the bright moonlight, single riders scattering across the snow.

"We should reach Owl Creek in three hours," Lieutenant Kincaid said. "Red Star won't be ready to move till dawn. The Sioux never attack at night."

Morgan was still gathering up the loose threads of the amazing story Kincaid had revealed. "Colonel Calendar and yourself were the only ones at the post who knew you were trying to trap Kile," he said slowly.

Lieutenant Kincaid laughed. "I had to keep you in the dark, Sergeant, because you were the man who made it most realistic. Everybody at the post knew you were bringing me in, and Shannon reported that to Kile. He knew you weren't pretending."

"That why Kile tried to have me killed?" Morgan asked.

Kincaid nodded soberly. "I didn't think he'd go that far, but he wanted me out of the service and you were interfering by forestalling my disgrace."

"I'll pay him back for that," Morgan promised. He had another thought then. "What about that gambler, Blackstone, and Maria Stevenson? They weren't in with the army."

Kincaid shook his head. "I don't know anything about them," he confessed, "except that several times Blackstone tried to get me out of the Alhambra. Kile and Blackstone don't seem to hit it off together, but Blackstone still stays on at the house."

"Reckon he saved my life a few nights ago," Morgan muttered. "Wonder where those two stand."

"She's a wonderful girl," Lawrence Kincaid said, looking straight ahead of him. "A man couldn't do any better—"

"What man?" Morgan Carr asked. He had an idea the Lieutenant was laughing at him.

"Best man that comes along," Kincaid grinned.

V

THEY reached Owl Creek at four o'clock in the morning with the stars and the moon still bright in the sky. The moon glistened on the white snow as the column of troopers rode across the barren plain, saddles creaking, a canteen banging occasionally.

Captain Drake called a halt at the Creek, and Morgan saw him conversing with Lieutenant Kincaid for a few moments. Kincaid came back then and nodded to Morgan. "We'll ride up ahead," he said. The order to the men was to "dismount."

Morgan followed the Lieutenant up along the Creek for a hundred yards. Then leaving the Creek, they rode due north, keeping in the cover of a grove of cottonwood trees.

"Owl Creek part of the Reservation border?" Morgan asked.

Kincaid nodded. "Red Star picked a good spot. He can reach Harrison in three hours from Owl Creek, and there are plenty of ranches around Harrison." The Lieutenant dismounted at the edge of the cottonwood grove, and the two horses were tethered in the thicket.

"I smell wood smoke," Morgan whispered. "How far is that gully?"

"Along the edge of this grove," Kincaid said. "Let's not fall into it."

Moving cautiously through the trees, Morgan noticed that the smell of wood smoke was becoming stronger all the time, but still there were no signs of the gully. Already the trees had started to thin out.

"Hell," Morgan whispered. He had stopped very suddenly. An Indian had risen seemingly out of the ground beyond the farthest tree. They saw him move along for thirty yards, and then disappear again.

Lying flat in the snow, Lieutenant Kincaid said tersely, "That's it, Sergeant."

They crept up to the edge of the gully and looked down. A half dozen fires were smoldering at the bottom of the gully. It was a long, narrow ravine, ideal for protection against the winter wind. Around the fires they could make out the huddled shapes of the sleepers, bundled in buffalo robes.

The horse herd was up at the north end of the gully, and the Indian they had seen had evidently been going in that direction to relieve the herder in charge.

Lieutenant Kincaid studied the gully for a long while in silence. It was less than thirty yards across and fifty feet deep, the banks sloping very sharply. The south end of the gully opened up on the plain, and Morgan saw Kincaid nodding his head as if pleased.

"We outnumber them," the Lieutenant murmured. "Captain Drake can send a troop charging right in through that open end. He can have his sharpshooters lined up along either wall. If they don't surrender, every one of them will be cut down."

"Red Star will fight," Morgan stated. "He knows this is his last chance."

"Might be better that way," Kincaid said. "He'll make trouble as long as he's alive."

They returned to the command and Kincaid made his report to Captain Drake. A consultation was held as the troopers waited quietly, speaking in low tones.

Morgan stood beside Trooper Buckman, waiting for Kincaid to come back. "Red Star shines for the last time tonight," Buckman observed.

Morgan watched the Lieutenants riding back to their companies. Company K rode off to the south. Company L, under the command of Lieutenant O'Neil, skirted Owl Creek, moving north toward the Sioux pony herd. Captain Drake went with Company K.

"B" Company waited for Kincaid's orders. The command to "mount" had not yet been given.

"Picket horses," Kincaid said to Morgan Carr. Morgan passed the word back, and steel picket posts were rammed into the snow, and the line drawn between them. Company B horses were tied to the line.

Lieutenant Kincaid addressed himself to a squat, black-bearded sergeant by the name of Cannon. "Take twenty-five men, Sergeant Cannon," he said. "Proceed through that cottonwood grove until you reach the gully. Post your men along the edge of the gully, but don't fire until you hear us open up from the other side.

Morgan grasped the strategy immediately. Captain Drake was sending Company L through the north end of the gully, while Company K came through the south end in a pincer movement. The fifty troopers lining either wall of the gully prevented the Sioux from getting out of the trap.

"Our job," Lieutenant Kincaid said to Morgan, "is to get across the gully near the south end without being seen. Red Star won't have any sentinels posted aside from his horse herders."

The order was given the remaining men of Company B to discard canteens, packs, and any other accoutrements, the noise of which might give them away. In single file they headed south along the edge of the cottonwood grove while Sergeant Cannon's party went directly through the woods.

MORGAN could hear the heavy breathing of the men behind him. A gun barrel clanked softly against a tree trunk once, and several men cursed at the offender.

They made a circuit, coming up on the gully about a hundred yards below the last Sioux fire. Kincaid called a halt here and crept to the edge of the indentation.

"We'll move across one at a time," he whispered. "Stay on this side, Sergeant, until they're all over. If you see anyone getting up around those fires hold your men here."

Morgan Carr watched Kincaid slide down the slope and race across the bottom of the gully. In another moment he had scrambled up the other side and out of sight.

"All right, boys," Morgan growled. "Line up. The chap that falls or makes any noise running across there will have his damned head shaved and painted green, if he lives."

Trooper Buckman chuckled, and Morgan sent him across. The veteran ran like a deer, tumbling over the edge of the gully at the other side. Morgan saw two heads peering across at him. He sent another, and then another trooper across the gully.

After eight were over, an Indian at the second fire got up to put more wood over the embers. Morgan waited till he'd folded himself in his buffalo robe again. The remaining seventeen men skipped across without any trouble, Morgan following them.

"All here?" Kincaid asked softly. They were crouching in a small indentation, not much larger than a buffalo wallow.

"We'll proceed along the edge of the gully," Kincaid started to say, and then he stopped very suddenly, a puzzled expression creeping over his face.

"Horses comin' up, sir," a trooper called from the far edge of the hole.

"Horses?" Kincaid muttered. He looked at Morgan Carr queerly.

"Reckon somebody got mixed up, Lieutenant," Morgan growled. "Our boys are coming from the wrong direction."

Kincaid lifted himself above the edge of the hole and stared toward the east. Morgan could see the body of riders coming up across a moonlit ridge a half mile away. There were about fifty in the party, and they were not riding in formation.

"They ain't troopers," Buckman stated flatly. "Those boys are comin' from Neville."

An Indian yelled from the gully, and the sleepers bounced to their feet. This new party was coming steadily, making no effort at concealment. Morgan Carr's eyes narrowed.

"Keep the boys down," Kincaid ordered. "We'll see what this is."

The riders were going to pass within thirty or forty yards of the hole in which the twenty-five troopers crouched. Watching the lead rider, Morgan recognized the man as they drew closer.

"Shannon's with his own crowd," he said tersely.

Kincaid bit his lips. "I hadn't figured on this," he admitted. "Kile's sending out a party of his toughs to see that Red Star doesn't back out of the deal. I wouldn't be surprised if Kile furnished the arms for Red Star."

Morgan watched the Indians race up to the rim of the gully as the toughs from

Neville came in. Corporal Shannon dismounted and walked directly toward a big Indian standing silently near one of the fires.

Lieutenant Kincaid lifted his gun in the air after the last white man had gone down into the gully.

"Run your men up along the edge of the gully," he ordered Morgan. "Commence firing immediately."

Kincaid waited until the troopers were ready. His gun cracked then, and Morgan leaped out of the hole with a yell. All along the opposite wall of the gully carbines started to bang. A bugle sounded from the south end of the gully, and then another one, faintly, from the north end.

"Damn 'em," Trooper Buckman growled at Morgan's side. "They outnumber us now, Sergeant."

Morgan dropped to his knees and began to pump bullets down into the gully. The bewildered Sioux had scattered in all directions, seeking cover, scrambling for weapons.

Ex-Corporal Shannon's toughs, some of them still mounted, were riding around wildly, yelling at each other. Red Star's booming voice sounded above the crackle of guns as he strove to rally his men. A dozen Sioux were already on the ground, but the others were beginning to fight back.

A trooper to Morgan's right moaned as a slug knocked him back from the edge of the gully. Shannon was roaring now also, and pointing toward the ridge on which Kincaid's men were stationed.

"They're coming up!" Kincaid shouted. "Be ready for them."

THE WITE MEN started a charge up the slope. Morgan could see Corporal Shannon's tense face in the moonlight. Trooper Buckman took a shot at the man and missed. A cartridge stuck in Morgan's gun as he tried to reload for a shot at the deserter.

By the time he got the cartridge out with a knife blade, Shannon was already on top of him. Swinging the Spencer, Morgan brought it down on Shannon's head as the red-haired man lunged over the rim.

Shannon went down without a sound. The other toughs were still coming on, cursing, crying as they were hit. The charge slowed up, hesitated for one moment, and then broke altogether.

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"Troopers comin' in," Buckman howled.

They could hear the horses driving in from the north end of the gully. The bugle sounded closer at hand.

"We're going down," Lieutenant Kincaid yelled.

Morgan watched a band of riderless horses suddenly tear out into the open, racing wildly around the smoldering campfires. These horses were spotted every imaginable color. Indians started leaping on their backs as they came up.

"Red Star's horses," Buckman growled at Morgan's side. "Our boys must o' chased 'em right down the gully. Ain't so good now."

Morgan watched Red Star himself leap onto the back of a big bay animal. The Sioux started a charge toward the south end of the gully, but pulled up abruptly as Captain Drake came through from that direction.

Lieutenant Kincaid led his men from one wall of the gully, and Sergeant Cannon from the other. There was a wild melee down below as the white troopers converged on the milling Indian riders.

Shannon's men had broken in all directions, some of them on foot, scrambling up out of the gully. Lieutenant O'Neil's company came up at a gallop, hitting Red Star from the rear.

Morgan saw Red Star trying to break through the cordon with a half dozen men. The big Indian's face was covered with blood from a head wound, but he was still up on the horse. Carbines banged from all directions and Red Star was

literally knocked from his mount, riddled with bullets.

The remainder of Red Star's bucks gave up the fight immediately.

Morgan Carr saw Lieutenant Kincaid race up to Captain Drake's side and say a few words which he could not hear in the noise. Gunpowder smoke filled the gully, choking the men. The snow beneath their horses' hoofs was churned up, with dark patches of blood where men had fallen.

Kincaid caught up a loose horse and yelled to Morgan to join him. "Five men," Kincaid was shouting at the top of his voice.

Morgan rapidly lined up five of the men who had been with him on the ridge. They caught some of the horses which Shannon's men had ridden into the gully.

"We're heading for Neville," Kincaid explained as they raced out of the gully. Some of those boys will get back to warn Roland Kile. We want him."

"We'll get him," Morgan grated.

A COLD WINTER'S SUN was coming up behind the houses of Neville, reflecting like burnished gold on window panes along the opposite side of the main street, when the seven troopers rode in.

Lieutenant Kincaid headed straight for the Alhambra, pushing his tired horse. Dismounting, he walked to the front door and tried to open it. The door was bolted on the inside.

Silently, Kincaid pointed toward the alley and drew out his Army Colt. Morgan Carr raced down the alley with Buckman at his heels. He heard Kincaid's gun roar as the Lieutenant shot away the bolt on the door.

The side door also was fastened shut, but Morgan smashed it in with his shoulder, stumbling into the little corridor in which he'd had his trouble with Jonas Bling.

The back stairway was empty, and Morgan went up the steps two at a time, gun in hand. He broke into the big gaming room, finding it empty, the floor strewn with cigarette butts and playing cards.

"Gone," Buckman growled. "Reckon those boys made pretty good time gettin' back here, Sergeant."

"The stables," Morgan muttered. "They might be saddling up."

He rushed down the stairs again, hearing Kincaid breaking into the lower floor. Out in the street, they headed down through the alley toward the stables behind the gambling house.

A big man was just coming out of the stable door, gun in hand, staring up the alley.

"Bling!" Buckman yelled. "They're still here."

Jonas Bling brought up his gun quickly his first shot knocking Buckman to his knee. Morgan saw the trooper clutching at his right shoulder as he stumbled. He fired carefully at Bling and saw the bouncer's head suddenly jerk up into the air as the slug caught him between the eyes. Bling came apart at the seams, collapsing in front of the barn door.

Morgan raced toward the door. He heard a woman scream from a window behind him, but he didn't stop to look around. He had his gun lined on the barn entrance when he heard another gun hammer click to his own right.

There was no time to bring his weapon around, but he caught a glimpse of Roland Kile, standing at the corner of the barn, gun held very steadily in his right hand, a thin smile on his waxy face. Kile was wearing a heavy, expensive buffalo coat.

Morgan Carr waited for the bang of that big gun in Kile's small hand. He had his chance, a very slim one, of getting Kile after the small man's slug hit him. He accepted that chance, and he was bringing his Army Colt around when another shot sounded from Morgan's rear, high up.

Kile's gun drooped. He spun half around, looking up toward the second floor window of the Alhambra, face twisted in wrath and hatred. He tried very hard to lift his own weapon up toward that window, but he lacked the strength.

Staggering back against the wall of the barn, Kile started to slide down into the snow. He sat there, eyes staring vacantly ahead of him, the gun still in his hand. He was dead when Morgan went up to him to kick the gun away. A bullet had gone through the buffalo coat in the vicinity of the little man's heart.

Morgan turned toward the house. Two people were looking down at him from the window. The dark-haired gambler, Blackstone, held a gun in his right hand. His

left arm was around Maria Stevenson's shoulders, and he was holding her steadily. The girl's head was down and it appeared as if she were crying.

Morgan Carr blinked up at them, and he felt something go out inside of him. *They were occupying the same room, man and wife!* He waved his gun in acknowledgment to Blackstone, and then Lieutenant Kincaid broke into sight, coming around the other end of the building.

"Little late, Lieutenant," Morgan muttered, and he was telling himself that he'd been a little late also. "Buckman was hit," he said next. "I'll look at him."

He went back up the alley and found Buckman sitting there, clutching his shoulder, cursing silently. He was helping the trooper into the gambling house when Blackstone came down the side stairs.

"I'll send a man to the post for an ambulance," Morgan said. "He's not hurt badly."

"Hell," Buckman grinned, "must a man have his damned head shot off for a brevet?"

Morgan sat the trooper down on the bottom step of the stairs. He turned to Blackstone, and he saw Maria Stevenson standing at the top of the stairs, looking down at him, her face still pale.

"Kile had me set up, Blackstone," Morgan said slowly. "Thanks to you, I'm alive."

THE GAMBLER lighted a cigar and puffed at it quietly. "I had to kill him sooner or later," he said. "It was only a matter of time."

Morgan stared from the gambler to Maria Stevenson.

"Roland Kile ruined my younger sister," Blackstone explained. "She ran off with him several years ago and disappeared. We've been trying to find her so that we could bring her back home. Only Kile knew where she was."

"We learned last night," Maria Stevenson half-sobbed, "that Ellen had died of consumption down in Texas. Kile deserted her there over a year ago." She paused. "Jonas Bling told us that for two thousand dollars."

Morgan turned to Blackstone. "Then you're not a professional gambler?"

"That is my business," Blackstone admitted. "I hired out at the Alhambra and I took much of Kile's abuse because I had to find out what had become of Ellen. Instinctively, Kile knew I loathed him, but he didn't know the reason." He smiled up toward Maria Stevenson. "Maria," he said, "insisted on accompanying me in my search. She got a job here as a singer."

Morgan was blinking from one to the other.

"Maria Stevenson," Blackstone smiled patiently, "is really Maria Blackstone, also my sister."

Morgan Carr took a deep breath. He heard Trooper Buckman mumble softly, "What in hell is all this gettin' anybody?"

Lieutenant Kincaid came through the door and heard the story from Morgan. He saw the light in the Sergeant's eyes as Morgan looked up the stairs toward Maria Blackstone. The girl was smiling down at him.

Kincaid rubbed his chin and grinned. "Lot of excitement around the post last night," he said suddenly. "Colonel Calendar asked me to announce that you had passed the examinations, and that you will receive your commission today. I forgot to tell you, Sergeant."

Morgan Carr gulped. "Thanks."

Lieutenant Kincaid paused at the door before going out again. He was grinning broadly. "Second Lieutenant Hendricks is being transferred to Fort Torrance," he said suddenly. "The Hendricks' have a nice cottage next to ours, Lieutenant Carr. It's large enough for two people. Look it over."

"I—I will," Morgan stammered. He felt himself getting red in the face. Kincaid and Blackstone went out into the street, and then Maria Blackstone started to come down the stairs.

Trooper Buckman heard her steps behind him, and he muttered softly, "Somebody get me the hell out of here, Lieutenant."

There was a swift rolling crash of gunfire.

SLADE'S KID RETURNS

By EDWIN K. SLOAT

The death lurking behind the flimsy falsefronts of roaring Bonanza Gulch had Randy Slade hypnotized with terror. And the only escape from that numbing trance lay in another coward's hands!

A FEW MILES OUT of Indian Point where the road forked, big Doc Mullins halted the covered wagon and pointed with his whip at the towering peaks ahead.

"Yonder lies Bonanza Gulch," he boomed in his deep voice. "It is a wild and lawless town filled with men who have aches and pains just as men have anywhere. They would gladly buy my famous Mullins' Miracle Cure, and would enjoy to the utmost Mullins' Miracle Show"

He paused and indicated the fork of the road shrinking to a white thread in the distance against the rolling foothills.

"In that direction lies Miner's Creek. My Mullins' Miracle Cure would be accepted with open arms there, too. Which of these two places shall we favor with our presence?"

Nancy Mullins, his daughter, looked anxiously at Yarrow Fennimore whose broad shoulders were hunched and whose hands, the strong muscular hands of youth, still shook from last night's heavy drinking bout.

Yarrow lifted his face, and the tiny mustache and goatee he affected as Yarrow the Great seemed only to accentuate his bitter, bloodshot eyes.

"Bonanza Gulch, of course," he said brusquely. "I thought we settled that last night. Everybody knows what the Gulch is. They've struck it rich over and over, and gold flows like water there. By all means, Bonanza Gulch."

Doc Mullins switched his gaze to the remaining member of his little show troupe. "And you, Randy?"

Randy, troubled in spite of his youthful twenty years, looked back at Doc Mullins with despair in his eyes. "I—I can't go to Bonanza Gulch," he said hoarsely.

"Why?" boomed Doc Mullins.

"I—I just can't go, that's all."

"In that case," said Doc Mullins agreeably, "we shall bend our steps toward Miner's Creek."

"Not me," said Yarrow curtly. "I want to see Bonanza Gulch, so that's where I'm going."

"We're just one big family, Yarrow." Doc Mullins' voice was persuasive. "Your mesmerizing is a valuable performance in the Mullins' Miracle Show, but you have said yourself that Randy is an exceptional subject, and without him your act might not be so successful. And, without Randy's amazing marksmanship with his old six-shooter, a large segment of our audience wouldn't stay to buy the Cure. And, too, if it were not for Nancy's guitar and voice to quell the savage breast, our going would be extremely rough now and then. And, lastly, without Mullins' Miracle Cure at five dollars a bottle, none of us would eat, and you, Yarrow, couldn't have your nightly bottle. Since it behooves us to get along together and respect each other's wishes, we should all go to Miner's Creek willingly."

"I'm going to Bonanza Gulch," repeated Yarrow angrily. "If the rest of you don't go with me, there'll be no more hypnotism on Mullins' Miracle Show. And that's that."

Doc Mullins' massive features flushed, but he kept his temper. "We shall vote," he said calmly. "Nancy, which do you prefer, the Gulch or the Creek?"

"Must we decide tonight?" cried the girl breathlessly. "Look! Yonder is a creek and grazing for the horses. Why can't we camp here? In the morning we can choose."

"An excellent idea," boomed her father. "We'll decide in the morning."

When they had eaten, Yarrow got his blankets from the wagon and made his bed out away from the fire, and got out the bottle of whiskey he had brought from Indian Point.

WHAT a shabby existence for the last of the Fennimores, he thought bitterly. How different everything was but a year ago when he was a student at Dr. Avery's medical college in Richmond with the promise of a fine practice among the wealthy families there as soon as he could hang out his shingle. How could he know that his father had gambled away the last of the Fennimore fortune, and that he was going to shoot himself rather than face the humiliation of bankruptcy?

Dr. Avery had pleaded with Yarrow to continue with his studies. Yarrow showed exceptional promise as a doctor, and a remarkable talent for hypnotism which Dr. Avery thought was a coming thing in medicine. Yarrow might have tried to stay on if it hadn't been for the creditor who cornered him outside Avery's office. Yarrow tried to placate him, but the creditor knocked him down. Yarrow was six feet tall and husky. He should have beaten up the creditor who was only an insolent little pup of a man, but instead Yarrow cowered against the building and begged not to be hit again.

Dr. Avery came outside and led Yarrow back into the office away from the jeering crowd of students. Dr. Avery didn't show his disappointment. All he said was that he was afraid that it would be a mistake, after all, for Yarrow to try to stay on at the college. "You could accomplish nothing," Avery concluded wearily. "You will first have to find yourself before you can accomplish anything anywhere."

So Yarrow left the world he knew and turned his face toward the West, ending

up with this travelling medicine show in the new country. Now he tipped up the bottle for a long time. The stars overhead blurred and grew unreal, and the bitterness didn't seem to burn so. He slept.

AFTER BREAKFAST next morning Doc Mullins spoke to Randy. "Nancy tells me you've changed your mind and want to go to Bonanza Gulch after all."

There was a hunted despairing look in Randy's eyes, but he only mumbled "Yeh, I changed my mind," and quickly turned away.

Yarrow shrugged. He knew what had happened. Nancy had changed Randy's mind for him, and she had done it because of Yarrow.

They came to Bonanza Gulch two days later and halted outside town to gaze at the ragged lines of falsefronts facing each other across the gulch in which the main street shared the bottom of the gulch with a brawling creek. Beyond the town loomed the buildings of the High Grade Mining Company with tailings that spilled down the sides of the gulch like huge, billowing skirts. The Gulch was old as boom camps went. It had been here at least ten years and was still going strong.

Doc Mullins pulled the wagon off the road and parked it in a clump of trees. He got out his battered old hat and carpet bag.

"I'll go in and look things over," he said. "Nancy will get dinner for you boys. Don't wait for me."

After Doc Mullins had gone, Yarrow got his bottle again and shook it. There was but little liquor left. He retired to the shade of a nearby tree, while Randy, moving like a white-faced, silent ghost, unhitched the horses, and Nancy made a fire and got out the skillet and coffee pot. Before they ate, Randy had his daily gun practice.

Nancy tossed six small glass balls into the air at once. Randy's gun hand moved almost too fast for eye to follow, and the old six-shooter blasted half a dozen times so rapidly the gunfire was almost a continuous thunder of sound. The balls exploded into dust.

Yarrow, watching from the tree shade, nipped at his bottle and wondered idly where Randy had learned to shoot like that. It was a good thing, Yarrow reflected bitterly, that Randy was a coward like himself, or Billy the Kid and all the other notorious gunmen in the West would be laid in the shade.

Doc Mullins returned about mid-afternoon. "Everything's okay," he boomed heartily. "A gambler named Ace Frennick runs the town. He owns the town marshal and the judge, but he doesn't mind medicine shows so long as they pay off. He only wants a hundred bucks for license fees and forty per cent of the take."

No one said anything. They were used to this sort of robbery. "And Frennick keeps the roughnecks under his thumb," Doc Mullins went on. "If he doesn't I will."

Doc wasn't boasting. Now and then when some drunken miner or wouldbe tough tried to break up the show, Doc put him in his place in no time. Nancy smiled at Yarrow, but Randy's face seemed a little grayer and his mouth a little tighter when Doc finished.

They drove into town around five o'clock. Doc Mullins had located some rough lumber and hired a couple of men to put up a platform in a vacant lot at the lower end of main street, between the livery stable and Evring's Trade Emporium, a long, weathered building constructed over a small, shallow ravine which gave it a basement. Directly across the street stood the Mother Lode Bar, the biggest saloon in the Gulch.

Word had spread swiftly through the town that a show had come to the Gulch, and as the final pale afterglow of dying day faded from the towering peaks and Doc finally got his newfangled gasoline torches to sputtering and flaring, a crowd gathered.

Doc Mullins sized up the audience shrewdly, and called to Nancy who climbed the steps to the platform carrying her guitar. She made a slender beautiful figure in her hoop skirt with her golden curls piled high on her head, and she sang wistfully of home and mother till the drunks were all but weeping, and Doc Mullins knew that he held the crowd in the palm of his hand.

"My friends," he boomed in his mighty voice, as Nancy slipped down the steps with her guitar and vanished into the wag-

on. "I have a splendid show for you, the finest ever seen in this vast new West, a show that has played before the crowned heads of Europe and which through a miracle—yes sir, folks, nothing less than a miracle—I was able to secure for my present American tour. Let me introduce first that master of the new magic, mesmerism, about which you have all heard but few have seen, a magic that makes a man your slave, that makes a giant out of a weakling. Meet Professor Yarrow the Great!"

Yarrow gave his black silk hat a final, scornful dab, and mounted the steps to the platform, making a tall, commanding figure in his long-tailed coat.

Randy came out of the wagon, in which he had remained since coming into town, and climbed the steps on dragging feet. His face was so white and desperate that it shocked even Yarrow. Randy seated himself on a stool, and Yarrow turned back the starched cuffs of his shirt. As he raised his hands in their customary theatrical gesture, a sudden commotion broke out in the crowd.

"By George, that's Slade's kid! He came back after all!"

YARROW jerked his head over his shoulder. A huge, unshaven man, obviously drunk, had drawn a gun and was shoving his way ruthlessly through the crowd to the edge of the platform.

A sharp gasp burst from Randy, and he sat woodenly, staring at the unshaven man.

"Run, Randy!" muttered Yarrow, sudden terror constricting his throat. But Randy only continued to stare as though petrified at the huge man climbing onto the platform.

"Your gun, Randy!" cried Yarrow hoarsely, gesturing at the old six-shooter on Randy's hip. "Use it!"

Even as he said it, Yarrow knew that the words were useless. Randy was so paralyzed with fear that his arms couldn't move. Yarrow stared wildly at the unshaven man getting up to his knees. The thought came to Yarrow that he could kick him off the platform, but like Randy, he too was so weighted down with terror that it was out of the question

"What's the meaning of this outrage!" bellowed Doc Mullins, charging up the steps like a bull. "Get out of here!"

Another man would have read death in the drunken, slitted eyes, but Doc Mullins ignored it, and swung a massive fist. It crashed against the unshaven jaw, and the stranger went sprawling.

He twisted like a cat. The gun came up and a bright finger of flame stabbed at Doc Mullins' heart. Doc jerked, tried convulsively to clutch his chest and came crashing down. The platform shook under the impact of his huge body.

Nancy rushed up on the platform screaming and grabbed the stranger's gun barrel as he got to his feet. He snarled a curse and tried to shake her off.

"Help, help!" she screamed, still clinging to the gun.

The crowd swarmed up on the platform, shouting. They pulled the drunken man down and tore the gun from his hands.

Yarrow didn't see it, though. He and Randy were running blindly through the darkness away from the platform.

"In here!" called someone sharply.

Before them was Evring's Trade Emporium with the stocky, bearded owner standing in the doorway. They dove blindly through the opening, and he closed the door swiftly behind them and locked it.

"Get down in the cellar," he ordered tersely. "Hide there. That was Shagg, Ace Frennick's pet gunswift, drunk as usual. They'll jail him—as usual. I'll slip out and see what's going on. You're Slade's kid, ain't you?" he added, staring at Randy. Randy nodded miserably.

"You look just like your dad," Evring went on. "We all thought you must have been killed. Well, I'll be going."

They descended the steps into the cellar under the store, and Evring shut the trap door above them, leaving them breathless and crouching in the blackness.

"Yeah, I came back," muttered Randy, talking mostly to himself. "But not the way I said I would. Lord, how I wish I could have come back like that!"

Above them a door slammed, feet tramped across the flor, and the trapdoor was lifted. Evring came down into the cellar, carrying a lantern.

"Shagg's in jail," he announced. "Judge Michaels will hear his case in the morning. Doc Mullins is dead. His body is over

at the undertaker's. His daughter is there now. I managed to slip her word that you two were safe. She's sort of dazed. Anyway it wouldn't be safe to bring her here. Ace Frennick's rannies are probably keeping an eye on her to get a line on you, Randy."

Randy only huddled farther back in his corner and nodded without looking up.

Evring said, "I'll leave the lantern. No light will get out of here. And I'll have my missus make a pot of coffee for you. Better try to get some sleep. We'll see what Judge Michaels does with Shagg in the morning."

Yarrow licked his dry lips and said stiffly, "I don't know how to thank you."

The bearded storekeeper laughed curtly, and there was no mirth in the sound of it. "Don't try to, mister," he said. "I'm not sticking my neck out for you or for Doc Mullins' daughter, either. I'm doing this for Slade's kid there. Slade was a friend of mine. He was a friend of a lot of us here in the Gulch." With that he turned abruptly and climbed the steps up to the store, and lowered the trapdoor.

Presently Yarrow spoke. "Your father must have been pretty important around here."

"He was the first town marshal Bonanza Gulch had," said Randy dully. "He made the miners, the gamblers and all walk the chalk line before Frennick came. Then Frennick opened his Mother Lode Bar and the trouble began. Dad laid down the law and told Frennick to clean up or lock up. Frennick sent back word that he was taking orders from nobody and that he'd be waiting.

"I was just twelve then and I was horribly afraid for dad. I tried to get him to stay away from Frennick, but Dad just smiled easy-like and said, 'Son, there's a time every so often when you can't stay away from something, and this is one of them.' The sun was setting and it made long, crooked shadows on the street when dad left the office. It just seemed like my heart would choke me as I stood there watching him go down that empty street, knowing that every man in the Gulch was hidden somewhere watching the showdown.

"Frennick was waiting in front of his saloon. Dad walked along steady toward him. Then Frennick reached for his gun, and so did Dad. But Dad's gun never cleared leather. There was a shot over near here somewhere, and Dad fell, shot in the back just as Frennick fired. Somebody drygulched him.

"Frennick was announcing in a loud voice that it had been a fair showdown, and I ran out of the office screaming that he was a liar. Some of his men caught me. I don't remember picking up Dad's old six-shooter, the one that hung beneath his desk, but I must have because it was in the waist of my trousers. It's the one I still carry.

"I tried to fight the men off, but they dragged me up to Ace Frennick who was standing over Dad lying there in the dust dead. They made me look down at him. Then Frennick said in a voice as cold as ice, 'No one calls me a liar, not even a button of a kid. Get out of this town. If you ever come back the same thing will happen to you that happened to your old man. Look at him again and remember that."

RANDY'S VOICE was feverish and high now, as the long-repressed words came tumbling from his mouth. "I told him that some day I'd come back and hunt him out. The man holding me gave me a push and I went on my face in the dust. I got up and ran."

"But what about Evring and all those others here?" interrupted Yarrow. "They all claimed to be friends of your dad."

"Frennick was too strong for them. He had too many gunmen around. No one dared do anything. His men hunted through the hills for me. It went on for days. Once while they were eating and I crept up close in spite of myself because I was nearly starved, I heard Shagg tell the others that Frennick would pay two thousand for me dead, and Shagg was out to get the money. But I got away and still had dad's old six-shooter which I found out was empty all the time.

"As soon as I could get a little work here and there I bought cartridges and practiced until I knew I was better than anyone else in the country with it, but it was no good. Every time I'd think about Frennick and Shagg and the Gulch and Dad lying there dead in the dust, cold sweat

would come out on me and my insides drew into a knot. I couldn't help it. I was just a plain coward, and I could never face them so long as I lived. That's why I didn't want to come to the Gulch. Oh, why did I ever let Nancy talk me into it!"

"I'm a bigger coward than you ever were," said Yarrow with harsh, sudden bitterness. "I let a little man half my size knock me down in front of a crowd. He made me beg for mercy. I've been trying to run away from myself ever since. I'm the one to blame for us coming here and this trouble. It was my own meanness. But I tell you," he went on passionately, "I'm done trying to run away from myself! I'm going to do something about it—somehow or other!"

"Maybe the judge will hang Shagg in the morning," said Randy listlessly, and it was obvious that he held no hope for such a thing.

Evring came back about the middle of the morning with Nancy. Her face was white, and hollows lay like haggard shadows under her eyes. She tried to speak, but her voice broke and she turned away.

"Judge Michaels turned Shagg loose," said Evring in a hard voice. "Fined him five bucks for being drunk, and Frennick paid the fine. Nancy wanted to tell you that she's sold the horses and wagon and bought a couple of tickets for you both. There'll be enough money to see you through for awhile. We'll smuggle you out tonight and you can catch the stage at Nine Mile Wash. I've spread word that both of you got away, so Frennick's rannies won't be looking for you. Frennick is putting on a great act, hanging around the street in front of the Mother Lode and saying that he's waiting for Slade's kid to make good his word and come and get him."

Randy groaned and covered his face with his hands. Yarrow said stiffly, "We can't accept this money. Nancy needs it herself."

Evring's expression was almost a sneer as he answered. "Don't worry about her, mister. We'll look after her, and we're giving her father a fitting burial this afternoon. Anyway, it wasn't my idea to give you the money; it was hers."

Yarrow turned to Nancy to protest, but she avoided his eyes and climbed the

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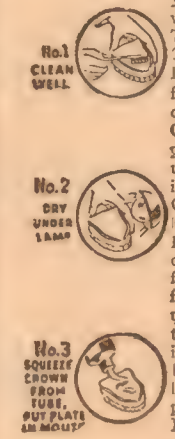

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steps up into the store. Evring followed. Yarrow could almost feel the unspoken disgust of the bearded storekeeper.

When they were gone, Randy groaned as though his very soul was being wrenched from him. "I wish I was dead, I wish I was dead," he whispered over and over.

Yarrow stood very still biting his lip. He wanted to take the old six-shooter himself and rush out on the street and face Frennick. But that would be plain suicide, for he knew so little about guns. He fought down the thought, and cast about desperately for some suggestion, some hope. Old Dr. Avery had said that you could sometimes accomplish miracles with hypnotism. Yarrow hadn't believed him. Hypnotism was merely a sensational trick in his opinion. But the words of Dr. Avery stuck in his mind.

Abruptly Yarrow turned to Randy. "Listen," he said hoarsely. "You'll probably get your wish that you were dead. We may both be dead shortly, but I'm going to try something. Look up at me."

Randy lifted his tortured eyes. Yarrow's hands made a few swift theatrical gestures before his face, and Randy's eyes became fixed in their stare. Yarrow wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers and spoke with all the hoarse earnestness he could muster.

"You have been afraid of Ace Frennick, but you are no longer afraid of him. You will never be afraid of him or any man again. When I wake you, you will forget what I am telling you."

Over and over Yarrow repeated the words, and at last he snapped his fingers.

RANDY'S EYES blinked, and he looked at Yarrow, unaware that he had been hypnotized. Yarrow wiped the sweat from his palms. He felt that he must scream. This was worse than useless, for he was sending Randy to his death. The thing would never work. But Yarrow was going along. If Randy faltered, he would see it through somehow.

They climbed the steps into the deserted store and paused there. Randy drew his old six-shooter casually and examined it. "Ace Frennick is waiting for me," he said quietly. "I'm going to meet him."

There was no fear in his voice nor in his face. Yarrow's pulse suddenly hammered in his throat. "We'll go out the back way," he said quickly. "Someone may be watching the front."

"You're not going, Yarrow."

"Yes I am! You may need help."

"No, Yarrow," Randy laid a hand on Yarrow's shoulder and smiled. "This is one of those things a man can't back out of or ask help in. I'm facing it alone."

While Yarrow stood irresolute, Randy left him and walked along the side of the building to the street. The building cut him off from sight as he turned and started toward the Mother Lode. Still torn with indecision, Yarrow stepped around the rear of the building and froze abruptly.

Someone was running toward him, his footfalls growing swiftly louder. It must be Randy coming back after all, thought Yarrow, and peered past the end of the building. But it wasn't Randy. It was Shagg, rifle in hand, his head twisted over his shoulder as though afraid of being seen.

From the street rose an excited cry, "Here comes Slade's kid!"

Abruptly Yarrow understood. Shagg was coming back here to the ravine for a clear shot at Randy's back across the open lot while Randy faced Ace Frennick. That's the way Shagg must have dry-gulched Randy's father.

Yarrow knew he could crawl under the store and hide, but he knew, too, that he wasn't going to. Shagg was armed, and Yarrow wasn't, but it made no difference. There would be no dry-gulching this time.

Yarrow flattened himself against the end of the building. As Shagg came around the corner, Yarrow leaped on him. The rifle flew from Shagg's fingers, and they rolled down the little slope to the bottom of the ravine. They rose together.

"Damn you!" choked Shagg, and smashed his fist into Yarrow's face.

Yarrow's head jerked, but he kept his feet.

Shagg reached for the gun on his hip, and Yarrow hit him in the neck. The gunman staggered, and before he could recover, Yarrow was on him, whipping his legs around Shagg's middle and pinning his arms against his sides.

They went down again with Shagg underneath. Yarrow locked his fingers in the gunman's dirty hair and beat his head

savagely against the ground till Shagg lost consciousness.

Yarrow got up, spat out a mouthful of blood, grabbed Shagg's six-gun, and clambered up the slope of the ravine to watch.

Randy was quite close to the Mother Lode now. Ace Frennick no longer lolled against the hitchrack watching him. Instead, he straightened slowly and ground his bootheels into the dust of the street for a swift draw.

"Slade's kid has come back, Ace," said Randy, and in the deathly hush of the empty street, the words came clearly to Yarrow.

"You're asking for it, kid," said Frennick, harshly, and his hand flipped back toward the holstered gun on his hip. His lips curled.

There was a swift rolling crash of gunfire, three shots that almost blurred with each other so close together they were. Ace Frennick came toppling slowly forward and struck heavily in the dust on his face, dead before he struck the ground, his fingers still clutching his gun He had fired it once—into the dirt. Randy Slade stood with the smoking six-shooter in his fist, waiting for him to move then slowly holstered his gun.

Yarrow choked down the wild impulse to shout his triumph, and turned back to Shagg who was beginning to groan. Yarrow hooked his fingers in the gunman's collar and jerked him to his feet.

"Up the bank, you skunk," he said savagely, and picked up the rifle and followed.

A growing, cheering crowd was milling about Randy, with everyone trying to shake his hand, as Yarrow came up with his captive. At the sight of them, a swift hush fell on the shouting men and they pushed back to make way.

"He was going to dry-gulch you from the ravine behind Evring's store, Randy," explained Yarrow.

Randy looked at Shagg without expression. "Just like you murdered my dad, Shagg? Give him his gun, Yarrow. Make your play, Shagg."

The crowd scrambled wildly out of the line of fire as Yarrow tossed Shagg's six-gun to him, but Shagg let it fall in the dust at his feet.

"I never dry-gulched nobody," he said hoarsely.

"I've got a witness that you tried to dry-gulch me just now!" said Randy. "So I'll turn you over to the law in the morning —and it won't be Judge Michaels either. It will be an old-fashioned miner's court —and justice."

RANDY turned away. With a choked course Shagg stooped and swept up the gun at his feet. Randy's back was toward him. But as fast as Shagg moved, he wasn't fast enough. Randy's six-shooter came out of its holster, pointed back under his left arm and flamed twice as Shagg tilted his gun up at Randy's back.

Dust whipped from the front of Shagg's checkered shirt, and he sprawled forward in the street and died trying feebly to get the gun up.

A mighty shout was tossed back from the falsefronts and the crowd swarmed in again. Willing hands lifted Randy high on men's shoulders, and above the roar sounded Evring's voice.

"Slade's kid is back! Meet a real town-tamer! This time we'll back the name of Slade with powder and lead, if need be!"

Yarrow felt a tug at his sleeve, and looked down into Nancy's eyes.

"You cured his fear, Yarrow!" she cried breathlessly. "Your mesmerizing did it somehow, I know! And you took Shagg a prisoner by yourself! How proud father would have been if he could have seen that! I can get the horses and the wagon back, Yarrow, and we can start a new show—"

"No, Nancy," he said gently. "I'm going back to Dr. Avery and tell him that I've finally found myself and that I want to be a real doctor. Then I can come back out to this country where there is so much to be done for the sick and hurt."

"Take me with you, Yarrow! I can learn to nurse! You will need help!"

He looked down into the blue depths of her eyes a long instant and found himself wondering how he could ever have thought any other girl existed. Oblivious of the crowd, he swept her into his arms.

"Make way for Crooked Chin! Madness has seized him!"

Two rugged soldiers, they. In the cruel, Mohawk-infested wilds of French Canada. Florac served his Majesty and Simplon served his God. But they shared a common enemy.

BRANDY IS THE DEVIL

By DeWITT NEWBURY

HE STOOD in the council chamber, a gloomy room in the ramshackle Chateau St. Louis. There were iron gyves on his legs and a dark mat of beard on his chin. Bits of straw from his prison bed still clung to his clothing.

The Sieur de Courcelle, Governor of Quebec, sat at the head of the table. The Bishop sat on one side, dressed in his plain black gown, and the Intendant on the other, in lace and ribbons.

Courcelle pulled at his gray mustache. He was a rough-hewn man who spoke bluntly. "Jean Florac, soldier of the Carignan Regiment, you have been condemned to death for the crime of murder."

Even now Florac could hardly understand it. He had survived so many hard

knocks. He had fought in the French civil wars, against the Turks and the savages of this new land. Only to meet his fate in Jacques Boisdon's tavern!

But this was his chance to speak. He spread out his hands. "Why call it murder, Messieurs? The citizen accused me of cheating at cards. Me. a man of honor! It was a fair fight, though—I even permitted him the first thrust!"

Hoping and fearing, he tried to read their faces. The Intendant, Talon, looked womanish with his smooth cheeks and curling locks, yet he was able; the king's agent needed both craft and wisdom. The Bishop was frowning under his black skullcap. He had thin features, a beaky nose and bold eyes.

Each was jealous of the other's authority, Florac knew. The Governor was all for the colony, the Intendant for King Louis, the Bishop for the Jesuit Order. What did they want with him? If he was to hang, why had he been brought before them?

The Bishop spoke next. "My son. there is an edict against duelling."

Florac shrugged his shoulders. The Jesuits had caused his arrest—those black-robed monks, so humble and yet so masterful. "There are edicts against everything!" he groaned. "Am I the only fellow who has broken them?"

Talon turned now, seeming to repress a smile. "Too many break them. The garrison troops are always quarreling with the townsmen. They brawl on the very steps of the cathedral, and drink more *eau de vie* than they eat food. They should have an example."

Himself out of a thousand! Florac felt his heart slow to a leaden beat.

The Intendant went on. "Nevertheless, in the King's name—at Monseigneur's suggestion and with the consent of his Excellency—I am willing to grant you a reprieve. On a condition."

FLORAC'S HEART stopped beating, then began to race. He stood straighter. "What is it?" he almost shouted.

Courcelle cleared his throat. "The Iroquois ask for peace. They fear us since we punished them so severely. The Mohawks have rebuilt the towns we burned, and now they beg us to send a mission, so they may learn our faith and become our friends."

He paused, and the Bishop explained further. "One of our Order will undertake the task. You may attend him, my son, to aid and serve in all things. Only you must go as a *donné,* a volunteer."

So that was it! He was to be a monk's servant, among the most ferocious savages in the land. *Bien!* Better that than a hempen collar.

He bowed his tangled head. "Needs must —when the saints drive."

"When the saints *call,*" the Bishop chided. "You will suffer hardship and danger, but will labor for the salvation of souls."

"And when you return," Talon added, "in a year or so, perhaps you will have earned a pardon."

The Bishop rose to take leave, the other two standing respectfully. When he was out of sight and hearing, they both relaxed.

The Governor filled an Indian pipe. "I'd have you know," he puffed "that there is more in this mission than Monseigneur implies. You'll not only serve a priest. You'll serve the colony."

"And the King," Talon smiled.

Courcelle leaned forward. "It is important that we gain influence over the Iroquois. The English have taken the Dutch colonies, and their power is growing. We must forestall them. If we convert those savages to our faith and our interest—as we have the Hurons and Algonquins—we will win all the fur trade of the south! Better still if we are able to send settlers to their country. Then New France will be greater!"

"You speak the tongue as I am told?" Talon questioned.

"A little Huron," Florac nodded, "which is nearly the same."

"You must make friends. Impress them with the might of *Onontio,* Great Mountain, as they call our governor, and the advantages of trade with us."

Courcelle blew out a cloud of smoke. "I am of the opinion that we should send a gift of brandy. A small cask, at least."

Talon shook his curled head. "The Bishop would never consent."

"He should know that savages will have brandy. If they get none from us, they'll get it from the English."

"Ah, but the missionary is to be Father

Simplon, just back from the Nipissing country. You know him?"

The Governor smoked in silence for a moment. "Then, Jean Florac, you shall take *eau de vie* in bottles, packed securely. Keep the contents of this pack a secret from Simplon, and give a bottle to each of the chiefs. Give two bottles to the Flemish half-blood called White Eyes. He is the war chief."

"Be sure," Talon warned, "to curb your own thirst."

"Messieurs," Florac protested, "I am a man of honor!"

An hour later he stood on the ramparts, free again. Well, not exactly free He had a hard journey before him. He was bound to servile attendance on a black-robe. Worst of all, he must go among the Mohawks unarmed, as a man of peace.

He turned his back on fort and chateau, and looked over the great square of Quebec. At the stone cathedral, the Jesuit seminary, Boisdon's tavern and the scattering of little houses. Then down at the Lower Town, the roofs of cabins and warehouses huddled within their palisade. He gazed across the river, at the great sweep of forest and height around it. And he filled his lungs with the keen air of spring.

Let him get out in that world of forest and stream, and he could be free. If he turned *courieur de bois,* neither Bishop nor king's man could catch him!

FLORAC was astonished when he first saw his master. Father Simplon was no low-voiced shadow, but an ox of a man.

He was watching the loading of the two canoes, directing the four Huron guides with a bull's bellow. A tangle of russet beard half covered his sunburned face, and huge arms and legs thrust out of his rusty cassock. He wore moccasins instead of sandals.

Florac himself was clothed as a woodrunner, in skin cap, fringed shirt and leggings. He set his pack down on the sloping shore and bared his head.

"Greeting, my child!" the father boomed. "What have you there? It's enough to sink a barge!"

Florac shrugged. "How should I know, *mon pere?* The Intendant sends it. See, his seal is here." The pack held twelve heavy bottles, as he knew very well. Each wrapped in a rabbit skin and the whole lashed tightly in moose-hide.

"We must find room, I suppose There is so much baggage! Dried plums—to reward the children for learning prayers—as well as our own provisions and my chapel fittings." The monk suddenly roared at the Hurons. "Careful! Don't drop that roll in the water! A picture of tormented souls in hell," he told Florac. "Such things impress the Indians."

The Lower Town had turned out to wave hats and kerchiefs, and some men had come down from the fort. They grasped Florac's shoulders, pressed their whiskered lips against his cheeks. "Come back, Jean," they said, "and bring your scalp with you!"

The canoes put off. Simplon in the first and Florac in the second, leaning against his pack of bottles. The Huron paddlers sang a prayer in barbarous French; they were wearing cast-off army coats feathers in their hair and no breeches.

The journey continued day after day. To the Richlieu River and up it to Chambly. Then came the toilsome portage past the rapids, the length of Lake Champlain, the narrows and Lake Sacrament. They camped ashore at night, fighting mosquitoes.

The route was not new to Florac. He had been over it two years before, in the autumn of 1666, when Courcelle had led an army of thirteen hundred to the Iroquois country. The savages had fled before them, terrified by the two small cannon, so they had killed none. But they had burned all five of the Mohawk towns.

That had been a victory, enough to quiet the Iroquois for a time. Now, perhaps, Father Simplon would tame them still further.

The monk proved more and more astonishing. He treated his servant as a comrade and shared the work. Built the camp fire, boiled the kettle of *sagamite,* corn mush, and on portages carried the heaviest load. He sang constantly with his enormous voice. Sometimes sacred songs, sometimes old songs of France.

"I was a campaigner," he said, "before I took the vows. I served under the great Turenne!"

One morning Florac was awakened by a strange sound, a splintering crash. He started up, clutching for the sword and arquebuse that were not there. The sound came again. And there was a reek of brandy in the thin air of dawn.

Brandy! His pack was gone from beside his bed. He rapped out an oath and ran toward that sound of breaking.

He found the bare-legged Hurons on the other side of a thicket. Two were hopping about wildly. The third was staring with a hand over his mouth, a gesture of amazement. The fourth was staring, too, his tongue out and drooling.

Father Simplon was on his knees with the open pack beside him. As Florac looked he took out another bottle and sent it hurtling against a rock, to smash with a loud crack and a splash of liquor.

"*Diable!* What are you doing?" Florac shouted. The monk fended him off with a bulky arm while he threw bottle after bottle. When the last was gone he heaved himself up and brushed his big hands together.

"You named it rightly," he chuckled. "The devil! I guessed what you carried so carefully."

Florac shrugged ruefully. "I brought it by order of M'sieur de Talon, the King's man."

Simplon bent shaggy brows. "He serves the King of France. I serve the King of Heaven! Such stuff drives savages to madness, fills them with the very fire of Satan. I'll have no dealing with it!"

He turned and roared at the Hurons. "Come away, my children! Stop sniffing at that spilled poison!"

That night they camped at the head of Lake Sacrament. And next morning the Hurons were gone. They had deserted, vanished into the forest.

"We must share the loads," Simplon said as he stirred the sagamite with lake water. "You're lucky to get rid of your bundle."

Florac threw down an armful of firewood. "I think," he grumbled, "they were disgusted at the waste of good *eau de vie.*"

The monk rumbled laughter. "I didn't expect them to face Mohawks, even in time of peace."

"They have sense," Florac said. "They will keep their scalps."

Simplon looked at him gravely. "They are cowardly children. You and I are soldiers of the Church. If we are killed we will go straight to heaven!"

"Speak for yourself, father," Florac muttered in his beard. "I am a soldier of the Carignan Regiment, and I'd rather see Canada again than heaven."

They hid the canoes in the undergrowth and burdened themselves with the packs. They had an Indian path to follow now. But it was a crooked path, leading over mountains, through swamps and across rivers for more than thirty leagues.

Florac struggled on, bent almost double and cursing the stinging insects. Slipping on mossy stones, tripping over fallen branches. Why hadn't he followed the traitor Hurons? Even now he could drop his load and run into the woods, head north to find some friendly camp of Algonquins!

Then he looked at the broad figure striding ahead, sturdy under an ox's load. He heard the great, rolling voice raised in a *chanson.* And his heart changed. He couldn't desert such a man.

No, he must help with the toil, must be staunch in time of danger. After all, he was still a soldier under orders. The thought made him grin wryly. If Courcelle and Talon could know that he carried plums for the children and nothing for the chiefs!

THE PATH had grown wider and smoother. This was lucky, Florac told himself. He had pulled his belt tight against hunger pains, but that didn't keep him from wanting to lean against one of the big trees or lie down among the bushes.

The food had all been gone for two days. Except the dried plums, of course; Simplon refused to eat them. The monk had grown thinner, yet he still strode ahead, firm on his stout legs. While Florac was staggering.

Florac thought of the plums now. He was starving under a backload of food! He thought of the wasted liquor, too. Just what he needed to put heart in him! He didn't notice that there was a scent of wood-smoke in the wind.

The three savages appeared from nowhere. Suddenly they were in the path ahead. Tall men, Iroquois. They were

nearly naked and had feathers knotted in their scalp-locks, but they were not painted. Nor did they draw belted hatchets.

They came forward, eyeing the father's red beard with admiration. The first said, "You are from Onontio? We are glad to see you."

"We have been waiting for you," the second grinned.

"Come to our town quickly," the third urged. "Come to Andarakay and make the people glad!"

They patted the Frenchmen caressingly, then took the packs and slung them on their own bare backs. Simplon kept his holy picture; he had taken more care of that than of himself.

In a few minutes they came out into fields of young corn, and saw the town on its knoll above the river. Andarakay, the largest town of the Mohawk Nation. Florac had seen it go up in flame and smoke, two years ago. Now it was as strong as ever, with a triple palisade.

They followed a hard-beaten track through the fields, around the curving wall of upright logs. It led to a gate facing the river. And here they were met by a screaming mob.

The screams were cries of welcome. Young men danced, women and girls pressed close to touch Simplon's beard, naked brats scampered about, until a dozen warriors began to clear the way by striking with long sticks.

"Come, Frenchmen!" they chanted, "Come to the sachems and chiefs!"

Florac felt his hackles rise as he went into the town. This welcome was too warm to be honest! Or why had the Mohawks—vengeful folk—grown so fond of their recent foes?

They crossed an open space, pounded smooth by moccasined feet. It held a huge heap of firewood and a scaffold for captives, empty now. The long, bark-covered houses stood around it.

The chiefs were in the council house, the largest of all. They sat in a row, each under a round moose-hide shield hanging on the wall. There had been no time for ceremonial painting, but they were wrapped in robes of beaver, marten or black squirrel; and they had the calumet ready.

The Frenchmen were seated on bearskins. Behind them the house filled with warriors, standing, squatting or sprawling on the floor.

There were ten chiefs, some old and wrinkled, some young and vigorous Florac recognized the half-blood, White Eyes. A man as tall as Simplon but leaner. He was an Indian in everything—shaven head and black scalp-lock, broad-cheeked face and coppery color—except his eyes Those were light gray, startling in that dark visage.

The stone pipe was passed around. Florac's empty belly ached as he pulled at it. He knew that the women outside were catching and killing dogs, gutting fish and pounding corn. And how he craved meat! Even roast dog; he had eaten worse in time of need. But the speech-making must come first.

White Eyes stood up and talked. The red hatchet was buried deep in the ground, he said, and the *Ganeagaono,* the Mohawk People, had forgotten where it was hidden. Onontio, the Great Mountain, was their father now. All his men were their brothers. They wanted Frenchmen to come and live with them, so great was their love.

An old sachem prepared to speak next. He was feeble, and before he could creak to his feet a younger chief leaped up.

THIS ONE was the only one who didn't have a friendly face. He was a lump-shouldered fellow with his hair in a cock's-comb ridge. His jaw had been broken by some blow and had healed awry.

"What gifts does Onontio send?" he demanded. "Where is the strong water? White men always give it, if they are friends!"

Father Simplon rose, beard bristling. "I bring you the best gift of all," he trumpeted, "a knowledge of the True Faith!"

The Mohawk snarled. "Are the French stingy, then?"

Florac was up now. He must do his best without those broken bottles. "I bring a message from Onontio!" he shouted. "Let the *Ganeagaono* go to him at Quebec, and he will give them brandy and red blankets and hatchets of iron! Take your furs to the French and you will be rich!"

The council had grown disorderly. The warriors were gabbling, the chiefs vainly

motioning for silence. White Eyes abruptly emptied the ashes from the calumet.

"We will feast our guests," he announced. "They have been treated with rudeness, and must be comforted."

THE MISSION seemed to go well at first. The Mohawks built a small house for Simplon's chapel, another for his dwelling. The children were eager enough to earn plums, and a few women accepted baptism.

Simplon even had hopes of the men. They came to wonder at his picture. But one of them said, "This is a fine thing! It shows how we will be happy in heaven, tormenting our enemies."

"It shows how you will be punished by fiends in hell," the monk corrected, "if you do not obey my teaching!"

The savages smiled, unconvinced. Florac looked at the picture and saw what was wrong. It had been painted for a northern mission. The damned souls were all Algonquins, but the devils looked very much like Mohawks.

On the whole, Simplon was encouraged. Florac was uneasy. The Indians were friendly, anxious to please, and kept asking that more Frenchmen might come to Andarakay. Yet there was something mocking about their kindness, and they would not agree to trade.

He talked to the chiefs at every opportunity. They would listen and nod politely, but that was all.

White Eyes was the only one who answered frankly. "We get what we want from Fort Orange. Cloth, iron, guns, powder, bullets. Why should we carry our furs any further?"

"The English have taken Fort Orange," Florac protested. "Would you trade with the men who have robbed the Dutch, your father's people?"

The chief grunted. "I am my mother's son. I am of the *Hodenosaunee,* the people of the Long House. What do I care for my father?"

"Try us," Florac urged. "Take your beavers to Quebec and see what they will bring."

"We would have your traders come to us. We would have fifty, a hundred Frenchmen come and dwell here! They should have land to build houses and plant corn."

"They will come," Florac promised, "since you have treated us two so well."

There it was again, that invitation. It was what Courcelle had hoped for, of course. And yet Florac felt a shiver in his bones when his glance turned to the scaffold in the middle of the town. French captives had been bound on such frames.

Before long something happened, something definitely disquieting. It seemed that Crooked Chin, the chief who had demanded strong water, had been nursing a grudge.

Florac was in one of the long lodges, with a circle of men who were sitting around the fire. They were playing *ononhara,* the dreaming game. Dreams had reality for the savages; to dream a thing meant that it was true or must come true.

A young brave stood up and pointed at his neighbor. "I dreamed that you gave me your English knife," he said.

The other pulled the knife from his belt and sadly handed it over. Then his gloomy face brightened. "I dreamed that it was only lent, not given, and that you gave it back very soon!"

There was laughter at this. The second man had scored his point.

The next player rose. "I dreamed that Blue Heron took a burning coal from the fire and swallowed it!"

Every one waited, grinning, to see what Blue Heron would do. He raked a glowing ember into his hard palm, spat on it, juggled it for a moment and popped it into his mouth.

Laughing with the others, Florac looked up to see Crooked Chin standing over him.

The lump-shouldered Mohawk bared his teeth. "I dreamed about you, Frenchman. That I struck you in the face, and that you bowed your head and suffered the blow like a woman!"

The brown hand fell. Florac rocked back with a cheek split, felt blood running into his beard. Careful now, he told himself. This was a game with rules. He held himself down with an iron effort.

After a minute he raised his throbbing head. Crooked Chin was still there, grimacing and gloating.

He said, "Yes, Mohawk, I had the same dream. That you struck me in time of peace, and at first I was too astonished to

move. But then I jumped up and struck you back—and knocked you into the fire!"

Crooked Chin went backward, his ugly mouth smashed. He floundered among the crackling sticks and rolled away, scattering ashes and embers. He came to his feet squalling with fury. Ready to kill.

But the game had rules! The other Indians were afoot and howling, too, howling mockery. He lowered the lifted hatchet, turned and strode out of the lodge.

The crook-jawed chief was an open enemy after that. He scowled and gritted his teeth at the two Frenchmen. And several of the younger warriors began to follow his lead and act as he did.

More trouble was brewing, as Florac read the signs. "The father's fault!" he worried. "They should have had the brandy. They like that better than the gospel."

The trouble came, aimed at Simplon this time.

IT CAME at the end of a long, lazy day. Florac was smoking before their hut, while Simplon was pacing to and fro, red beard on his chest as he told his beads. The town was waking up in the cool of evening. Men talked in groups or lounged in rows along the house walls. Children tussled with each other. Women were bringing kettles of water up from the river.

Suddenly two young braves ran through the open gate, both yelling. "Make way for Crooked Chin!" they bawled. "Madness has seized him! An *oki,* a spirit, is in him and he is raging!"

At their heels came a hideous figure. Crooked Chin, his head bristling hawk-feathers, his whole body striped with red and black paint. His face was convulsed, eyes rolling, teeth gnashing. Foam bubbled from his mouth, and he swung a spiked war club from side to side.

Men, women and children scattered out of his path. He shrieked and jibbered, spewed froth and dashed straight at the astounded monk. The club whirled up.

Florac knew, even as he started forward, what this meant. Savages held a crazed man in awe, never thwarted him or held him responsible for violence. This was another sort of game, with its own rules!

He was too late to save Simplon. But the father saved himself. He stooped, the club whistling past him, gripped Crooked Chin's left hand with his own right and thrust a shoulder under the Mohawk's armpit. It was a neat wrestler's throw. Crooked Chin spun in the air, arms and legs spread. He came down with a crunching thud and lay writhing, the wind knocked out of him.

Simplon stood with hands on hips. "A madman, eh?" he puffed. *"Voila!* I know a medicine that will cure him quickly."

He caught up a water pot and deluged the sprawling man. At that every Indian in sight—men and women alike—began to screech laughter. Certainly they knew the madness was pretended. They grabbed pots and kettles, and half drowned Crooked Chin with cold river water.

The maniac choked and sputtered, managed to struggle up. He was sane again. Sane enough to rush snarling through the crowd and out of the town. And that was the last they saw of him for some time.

Father Simplon had gained great respect as a man of might, and most of the Mohawks had sided with the Frenchmen. So perhaps the occurrence was not unlucky, Florac thought. He would take advantage of it to make their position more secure.

He spoke to man after man, chiefs and warriors alike. "Do not offend the Red-Haired Father, for he is a magic-maker and his medicine is strong. His Manitou is far mightier than your *Jouskeha* or *Agrekoui!* He could bring all the French fighting-men here in an instant, if you should break the peace. Your town has been burned once. Do you want it burned again?"

They listened and clapped their hands over their mouths. For the time they were impressed.

IN A FEW DAYS White Eyes announced that he was going on a journey. "We have some skins left over from last winter. They may spoil if we keep them any longer. I will take Crooked Chin with me, so that he cannot act foolishly."

"You are taking furs to trade?" Florac asked. "To Quebec?"

The chief shook his shaved head. "No, down the river. But you? Why do you

not go back and bring more Frenchmen to our country?"

"We must stay here," Simplon told him. "We are pledged to remain for a year before returning to report progress."

White Eyes wrinkled his brown forehead. "A year is a long time! Perhaps the *Ganeagaono* will grow impatient."

Was there a threat in his words? Florac couldn't be sure. The Mohawks were bound for Fort Orange, though, and that was bad enough.

They brought out their rank-smelling bundles of roughly-cured furs and carried them down to the canoes. Some fifty braves set out. They were decked with plumes, their faces and breasts streaked with white paint.

And now the town was quiet for two weeks. Simplon taught another prayer to his pupils, won over a few more women and baptized an old grandfather. He was delighted with his success, full of hope for the future.

But there was to be no future for the mission.

Florac was fishing with borrowed hook and line when the first canoe came up the river. It shot out of a shadowed bend and surged up, the two Indians yelping as they swung the paddles.

They ran the bark shell ashore and went racing up to the town, still yelping. Florac waited and wondered. The men had brought news, that was sure. After a while he coiled his line and followed them.

Near the gate he was obliged to step aside. A crowd was coming out, women and children. The women looked anxious. They carried food pots and rolled robes, and urged their young along with sharp voices.

"They are going to sleep in the woods," Florac thought. "What threatens? It can't be war, or they wouldn't leave protection like this."

Inside the gate he stopped and stared. It must be war! The men, old and young, were running about busily. Some were dragging logs from the wood-stack to build a fire. Others were coming from the lodges with arms full of weapons. Knives and hatchets, clubs, bows and firearms.

No, they were disarming, not arming themselves. He nodded in sudden understanding. They were taking the weapons to the council house, putting them out of reach.

"So they won't hurt each other when they grow frantic. They are making ready for a brandy feast!" Florac hurried to find Simplon.

The father was on his knees in the chapel. At his evening devotion, and not to be disturbed. Florac backed out and stood watching the scurrying Indians. *"Mort d'un mort!"* he muttered. "This is very bad!"

He heard the returning voyagers while they were still on the river. A chorus of wild yells in the distance, coming nearer and nearer. The clamor grew loud as they landed and climbed to the gate.

IT WAS DARK. The fire was flaring high in the open ground. The flames lit up a procession of prancing figures. Among them were panting men who wrestled with two barrels, heaving, dragging and rolling them. Enough liquor to madden the whole town!

"Strong water!" they were chanting. "English strong water!"

All the Indians in the town surged forward, screaming their loudest. The newcomers were disarmed like the others. One cask was rolled into the council house, the other upended near the fire and the head knocked in with a stone.

The drinkers kept some sort of order at first. They formed lines, every man with a bowl or wooden cup in his hand, and danced past the barrel. Each drank and danced on.

Then they formed a circle and began a faster and more violent capering. They stamped, bent double, leaped high in the air. Their yelping voices seemed to fill the night. Now and then they broke step and rushed to the cask.

Florac's ears were ringing with the uproar. Suddenly he was stunned by a louder, nearer sound. A sound like a bull's bellow.

Father Simplon was there in the chapel doorway, his beard redder than ever in the firelight. He shook both great fists at the dancing men, roared like a bull again and charged like a bull.

He broke into the circle, knocking Indians right and left, planted a huge, moccasined foot against the cask and upset

it. The liquor flooded out, caught fire and spread in a lake of blue flames.

The Mohawks halted in their tracks. There was dead silence for a moment, then a howl went up that seemed to shake the stars. They closed on the monk, splashing heedlessly through the fiery pool.

Crooked Chin was the first to reach him. Lacking a weapon, the ugly chief picked up a stone. A round boulder, the stone that had broached the cask. He hurled it at Simplon's bare head and the father went down like a felled ox. Crooked Chin pounced on his prone body, mauling with hands and teeth.

By that time Florac was in the melee. He found the stone and pounded the chief's shaven skull. Saw it turn to red pulp before a half-dozen pairs of naked arms wrapped him and dragged him helplessly away.

He was deafened by the yelling "Fetch our weapons! Cut the Frenchmen to pieces!"

"Take their hair!"

"Bite out their throats!"

"Throw them into the fire!"

One voice was gradually mastering the others. "Leave them whole!" White Eyes was thundering. "They shall burn, but slowly! Not here, but tied to a stake!"

The howling died down, the confusion quieted. White Eyes turned on Florac, helpless in a strangling grip. The war chief smiled. And the smile was a wolfish grin of sheer hate.

"We wanted more of you to torment, many more," he said. "But now Crooked Chin is dead, a whole river of strong water wasted, and our revenge cannot wait. We will catch plenty of Frenchmen by and by—fifty, a hundred—and burn them, too!"

THEY LASHED his hands and feet with thongs, and bound the lifeless monk in the same way. The two were hauled over to the scaffold.

Simplon was heavy, though. Four men panted and grunted as they tried to heave him up the ladder. Then one made a gobbling noise, pointed greedily. The second brandy barrel had been rolled out of the council house.

They gave up the effort, hastily slung their captives under the scaffold and ran whooping to join the mob.

Florac managed to sit up and wrenched at the thongs. They would not give. "Pity I didn't hang in Quebec!" he muttered, and leaned a shoulder against one of the upright posts.

Intoxication was mounting in the savages. Most of them were dancing again. Some ran to and fro; others tumbled on the ground. Several couples were fighting, tooth and nail. There was a continuous squalling struggle about the broached barrel.

The space under the scaffold seemed peaceful by contrast. Florac peered at Simplon's bulk, stretched beside him.

"Are you still alive, father?" he asked.

Simplon raised himself a little "I have a very hard head. They struck me down, eh?"

"You might better have died then. They mean to burn us."

A pause, and Simplon spoke in a stronger voice. "Martyrdom is a glorious thing, my son!"

Florac licked his whiskered lips and spat out dust. "Glorious for you, *mon pere*. For me it would be painful."

Simplon turned his battered head toward the cask and the frenzy around it. "We were betrayed by Satan. Ah, brandy is the devil!"

"English brandy!" Florac said bitterly. "If we had given them ours, a few bottles! Or if you hadn't interfered! But no, we were betrayed from the beginning. We were nothing but bait! They planned to lure as many as they could to destruction." And he told how White Eyes had boasted.

The monk growled, deep in his throat. "The old wickedness is stirring in me, and I long to smite the heathen. *Miserere!* My vows forbid. None the less—"

He stiffened and strained, his breathing grew hard. Then came a snapping sound. "Ha! Heaven means us to live, for heaven gave me stout thews. I will free you now. And you, my son, are still a soldier!"

His own thongs broken, Simplon went to work on Florac's. His strong fingers forced or coaxed the knots apart. "Yet you cannot battle three hundred warriors," he warned. "When they grow stupid, per-

haps we will be able to reach the gate."

"I have been watching," Florac said, "and that cursed White Eyes won't get drunk. He is standing guard at the gate. Wait, father, and I'll see what can be done."

The firelight was flickering, obscured by prancing figures. He waited his chance, crawled out into shadow and dodged behind the council house. "I'll give them a diversion in the rear," he murmured with a chuckle. "The Regiment of Carignan is attacking!"

A weapon first. They were all in the council house, and he pried a slab of bark from the rear wall.

The place was not quite dark inside. The council fire was smoldering, banked with ashes; it was never allowed to die. He blew it brighter, then pawed over a pile of guns. "A lot of rubbish," he grumbled, "rusty old match and wheel-locks. *Hola!* Here's a proper flint-lock, a Dutch *carabine!*' He seized it and slung powder flask and bullet pouch over his shoulders.

Next he took one of the moose-hide shields from the wall, shoveled up coals from the fire and sowed them along the bark sides. Last, working quickly, he gathered an armful of flasks and dropped them into hot ashes.

He crept out with his stolen weapon, and regained the scaffold barely in time.

Smoke was leaking from every crack in the long bark lodge. It grew thicker, began to glow. Suddenly there was a shattering explosion, another and another. The powder flasks were blowing up as they heated. Then a red glare lit the whole town, and the council house burst into a mass of roaring, crackling fire.

The next house caught almost immediately, and the one beyond. More powder exploded with a jarring thud.

The Mohawks were caught in the pitiless glare. Their rioting had stopped as if they had all been turned into devilish statues. Florac saw their shining eyeballs, open mouths and bare bodies glistening with sweat.

He touched Simplon's arm. "There, father! That's how a picture of hell should look."

They stood staring dumbly at the spouting flames and the billowing, cinder-shot smoke. Until a drunken voice shrieked, "Onontio's men are shooting their big guns! The magic-maker brought them!"

Groans and howls drowned out the roar of fire. "The French have come!"

"They are burning our town again!"

"Run, run! We have no weapons!"

With one impulse the whole horde swept toward the gate. Screaming, reeling and stumbling, fighting each other.

White Eyes was there. He tried to stop them, first with shouts and lifted hands, then with blows. They beat him down, fought their way out and fled. Down to the river or across the fields to the forest.

Florac and Simplon dashed out a little later, arms shielding their heads from the hot blast and rain of cinders.

AFLOAT AGAIN in one of the canoes, they headed down Lake Sacrament. They were ragged, weary and lean from forced marches. But not famished; the stolen carabine had knocked over a buck or two. Danger was behind them.

Yet Florac was not happy. He turned, laying his paddle across the bows.

"*Mon pere,*" he blurted, "I must ask your counsel!"

Simplon lifted the after paddle and held it dripping. "I listen, my son."

Florac sighed. "Father, I am a man condemned. I had orders to win the Mohawks over to France and the colony. I failed, and the penalty is hanging. *Mort d'un mort!* Shall I return for that? I'd rather desert, run off to the Upper Lakes, if you didn't need my help to voyage home!"

Simplon chuckled, his big shoulders shaking. "Be tranquil, Jean. When I report your piety and faithful service to the Bishop, he will give you his blessing."

Florac frowned doubtfully. "The Governor? The Intendant?"

"Now I speak as the soldier I once was. When the savages revealed their treachery and broke the peace—through no fault of yours—it was necessary to punish them promptly. This you accomplished. A whole army in yourself! For you there will be commendation and no hanging."

Jean Florac sighed again, this time more cheerfully. He picked up his paddle and dipped it deeply.

IT WAS MORNING and, by all rules of the Overland Trail, time for this emigrant train to be inspanning for the day's start. Mists hugged the broad surface of the Platte; to the West, Scott's Bluff lifted pink and shining in new sunlight. And yet the high tilts of Conestoga wagons, stirring in an early breeze, still formed the circle of the night's corral with their ox teams grazing nearby, forgotten.

Within the ring of wagons, the men of the train had gathered in grim and serious council. Simple men most of them, taking their families to a new home in distant Oregon, and unused to the threatening land through which broad, iron-tired wagon wheels were bearing them. And now death had struck down their leader—young Len

Traynor fired until his guns were empty.

ON TREACHERY TRAIL

By D. B. NEWTON

The wagon train creaked along in ominous silence—the vast sky brooding, the huge plains waiting—Jim Traynor scouted grimly ahead for danger, knowing that behind his back eyes burned on him with hatred and fingers crooked yearningly for triggers!

Douglas, the only plains-wise veteran in the company.

They had been leaning heavily on Douglas, had pinned on him their hopes of getting through the unknown dangers of the wilderness. Now, in their inexperience of frontier justice, it was up to them to try—and pass sentence on—the stranger accused of his murder.

"There isn't any question about it!" Ed Bronson was holding forth; Bronson, a bachelor, had been an unsuccessful lawyer in an Iowa town and was heading West with the avowed intention of finding a new political future. "Every man in our company has got along well with Douglas, with no trouble of any kind since we left Saint Joe. But now this stranger—this Jim Traynor—"

Voice edged with a jury-baiter's professional scorn, Bronson pointed at the defendant standing before them with arms

bound, dark face expressionless, rawhide frame showing an easy, natural grace.

"It was just last evening this frontier riff-raff overtook our wagons, riding an Indian cayuse he'd obviously pushed hard all the way from the Missouri, he was that anxious to catch up with Len Douglas. We saw Traynor's face when they finally met—not a pretty expression to go hunting a man with! We heard them arguing, we know there was bad blood between the two for some reason. And this morning Len Douglas is dead. Where's any mystery in it?"

There was a moment's silence. Matt McKay, graybeard Illinois farmer, shook his head slowly. "We got no actual proof, Ed," he observed in his careful way. "We haven't found the knife that was slid in between Len's ribs, or anyone who can say for sure Traynor was near Len's wagon at any time—"

Bronson started shouting; he could never hold his temper when anyone disagreed with him. "If this man Traynor isn't guilty, let's hear something from him! Let's hear him tell why he chased our train all the way from Saint Joe; let's hear from his own lips what it was we overheard him and Len Douglas rowing about!"

All eyes turned at that, rested on Jim Traynor. The plainsman met them coldly, levelly. The red sunlight of morning, coming through rising mists across the flat waste of the prairie, brought out sharp, unyielding lines in his lean features. "That's something that can't be brought into this!" he said shortly. "It had nothing to do with the killing—and neither did I!"

It was a poor defense, blunt and tactless, but Jim Traynor had no gift for speech. He stood, alone and without friends, in the midst of this emigrant council, feeling their hostility beat against him. Even old Matt McKay showed his suspicion now. Glancing quickly around the ring, the accused could see that look reflected, in varying degrees, in nearly every other face.

There was one notable exception. . . .

THE GIRL'S NAME, Jim Traynor knew, was Allie; and she was old Matt's daughter. He read consternation in her bright brown eyes, sensed that she was on the verge of breaking in on the deliberations of the men. Jim caught her glance, shook his head in quick warning. He was sure she could not understand why he wanted her to keep silent, to withhold the facts she knew would clear him. Yet, puzzled, she obeyed his unspoken request.

Ed Bronson said, in triumph, "Well, we've heard him—and I for one don't care much for what we heard. There's not a reason why this killer shouldn't be strung up to a wagon tongue!"

"We'll take a vote!"

With all eyes on him, Matt McKay moved a little away from the knot of emigrants, out into the middle of the corral. There in the dust he marked a long, uneven line with the blunt toe of one worn boot. Then, facing the others, he said, "Let them that favors hangin' step onto one side of this line; those that don't agree, take the other. We'll see how we split up."

There was a moment of silence after that, not a man of them wanting to take the initiative. Then Ed Bronson broke the heavy quiet. He grunted, hitched up the belt of his jeans. "No point hanging back!" he growled. "Everyone knows how *I* stand on this." And he moved forward with a jerky motion of his long legs. He stepped carefully over the line in the dust, ran the edge of one hand across sandy mustache. Then he spoke harshly, "Who besides me says, 'Hang him'?"

A stir ran through the uneasy group. Suddenly another emigrant strode forward and ranged himself beside Bronson. Two more drifted out. And still the defendant's side of the line remained bare and empty.

Someone called out, "How you votin', Matt?"

McKay shook his head, ran lean fingers through tangled beard. "I ain't ready to say yet," he muttered, slowly. "I've lived a spell of time, folks, but I never had to condemn a fellow-bein' to death before—"

A man pushed through the crowd suddenly, strode firmly forward. But this one did not cross the line. Just short of it he halted, turned—a lone, slight figure of a man, smooth shaven, with an unruly shock of fair hair and a sun-blistered nose that had begun to peel. As he faced them

all defiantly, Jim Traynor eyed with interest of this person who had broken the unanimous decision against him.

Ed Bronson had a sneer on his face. "What's the deal, Shelby? Just aiming to be different—or do you think you've got reasons for your vote? If so, you owe it to all of us to sing out and let us hear them."

"Certainly!" Paul Shelby was about Traynor's own age—maybe in the late twenties. He spoke clearly, without self-consciousness. "I don't pretend to know if Traynor killed Len Douglas—looks as though he could have. But, either way, we wouldn't dare to hang him!"

An angry growl went up. Shelby lifted his voice above it. "Has it occurred to any of you that we've still got to get on to Oregon? I'm just a storekeeper, myself, that hopes to start a business in the Willamette Valley. And who else in the train is qualified to get us through this wilderness? No one I know of!

"With Len Douglas killed we're a bunch of lost sheep—that's the long and the short of it! Who's going to show us how to fix our wagons when they break down, or how to take them across the rivers that are too high for fording? How about protecting ourselves from Indian attacks? Who even knows the road on from here? None of us! But thank God there is a man we can turn to—a man who knows this country and the ways to beat it. And that's him!"

He flung out one arm, pointing straight at Jim Traynor. "I've heard of Traynor, back in my store in Missouri," he went on, through the rising hum of voices. "I never heard nothing bad about him—only that he's spent years in this country and he knows it like the palm of his hand. I say there's just one thing to do, if we've got any brains. Forget Len Douglas! Say to Jim Traynor, 'Maybe you did kill him; maybe you had your reasons—or maybe by ordinary standards you deserve to hang. But we'll spare your neck on the one condition that you take on the job of train captain, and get this company through to Oregon.' Tell him that—and see what he says!"

A wave of protest from Bronson's friends washed over those last words, but Shelby had made his point and it showed in the eyes of those who had not yet cast their votes. Jim Traynor glanced at Allie McKay, saw hope struggling with the pallor of her anxious face. A damn pretty girl, he thought, irrelevantly. . . .

"Matt!" A dozen voices had taken up the bearded leader's name. They were appealing to him as they had learned to do in moments of hard decision. But before he would answer he moved a little away, put one hard, calloused palm against the iron of a wagon tire and leaned against it.

HE LAID the glance of steel-gray eyes out across the flat and hostile prairies. Then he looked at the wagons, and he looked at the tired face of his wife, trusting and confident as he stood with one arm around the waist of their tall and lovely daughter. You could see the slow, plodding working of his mind.

"It's a hard decision," he muttered, at last. "But there's too damn much truth in what Paul Shelby says for us to put it aside. Maybe, in a time of necessity, what we think of as justice has got to be forgotten." He turned on the prisoner suddenly. "What about it? Would you make such a bargain with us, Jim Traynor?"

Traynor's dark face showed cold, unyielding. "If the lot of you are so sure I'm guilty," the prisoner said, briefly, "I don't reckon there's a hell of a lot of choice."

"That's good enough for me," someone called out. "Cut him loose!"

All at once the decision of the wagon train, turned by young Shelby's argument, had shaped itself. More and more voices took up the chorus to free Traynor. And then the ropes binding him and had fallen away and he was chafing his wrists, bringing the circulation back into them. He said, "Do I get my guns back? Somebody's got to fetch meat for the company," he pointed out, in the face of their hostility to that demand.

Someone handed him, grudgingly, the pair of cap-and-ball short guns and he slipped them into their leather pouches on his thighs. Jim Traynor sensed the strangeness, the tension, of this thing. They were giving over to him not only his freedom but full command, as well, of their wagons and their very safety—and yet

hardly a man or woman in the emigrant company was not convinced that he had murdered Len Douglas in cold blood.

He let none of this touch his voice or his manner as he took control, with brisk efficiency.

"First thing we've got to do is get these wagons rolling. See where the sun is? We've lost hours of travel time—and it's a good fifteen miles to the next decent camping place; we'll have to do some pushing to make it by dark.

"Another thing: From now on you're to keep a better guard, understand? While you were wasting your time on me this morning, anyone—redskins or otherwise—could have struck this outfit and caught the whole works napping. Now, start moving! Let's yoke up!"

"Just a minute!"

Ed Bronson and his three friends had not moved. They stood there, a solid and hostile group, the line that McKay had drawn still etched in the dust at their feet. Bronson's face was a study in rage and angry pride—anger, because his own advice had gone unheeded. He rubbed knuckles across his sandy brush of mustache, in a habitual gesture.

"I'll follow no orders from this man!" he bellowed.

"You will," Traynor retorted, facing him squarely, "or you'll leave the company. If I've been made train captain, my orders are gonna have to be obeyed—without exception!"

Bronson snorted. "Maybe the rest have lost their senses. I'm damned if I have—"

This was revolt—and Jim Traynor would have to meet and quell it, or his hold on the train, shaky as it was, would be lost. Without another word he moved in on Bronson; the man gave ground before him. Traynor shoved aside the skinny arms that the lawyer put up in self defense, gathered the front of the man's hickory shirt in one hard hand, and hauled him up on the toes of his long, thin legs.

"Now get this straight!" Jim said flatly. "An outfit like yours travels in the midst of danger—and it's only as strong as the men that belong to it. I've promised to get this train through to Oregon, and I'll not let you risk the lives of the whole company because you don't happen to like me!"

He let the man go, giving him a shove that caused Bronson to trip over his own long legs and hit the dirt solidly. The lawyer did not hurry to get up again; over his ungainly shape Jim Traynor faced the other three who had voted with him. "That also goes for you," the new captain added; he backed away, included the whole company in his words. "And for anyone else who thinks they have a score to settle. After we've reached the Willamette—see me then!"

II

HE HAD BROKEN the back of dissent. The train came alive as men turned to the work of striking camp and getting the day's journey belatedly under way, but there was hostility, even yet. Jim Traynor knew they would take his commands because they felt they must. These people would continue to suspect him—to hate him.

As he passed among them with a smooth, rolling stride, face expressionless, he felt a hand touch the sleeve of his buckskins. Jim stopped and turned to look down into the troubled eyes of Allie McKay. "Why didn't you let me speak?" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you let me tell them—?"

He shook his head firmly. "We still don't know who did the killing. And I can't tip my hand—give the real murderer a look at the only ace I got in the hole. Keep him in the dark about Len and me, and there's a chance he'll make a slip."

"But this puts you in an impossible situation! Giving orders to men who secretly despise you—"

"I hadn't noticed it was a secret," he replied with grim humor. "Still—"

Her father's voice, calling Allie's name sharply, cut in on their words. Old Matt McKay was coming toward them, a dangerous look about him.

"One thing has got to be clear, Traynor," the graybeard stated flatly, shoving himself in between the man and the girl. "Even being train captain don't give you social privileges. Please remember, after this, your attentions ain't wanted by any member of my family!"

But Allie McKay broke in quickly. "Dad, it was I spoke to Jim Traynor—not the other way around."

"Oh." Matt looked a little taken back. But he still had more to say.

"I ain't convinced yet," he growled, "that we didn't make a mistake, Traynor. When your bronc's between your legs again, I half expect to see you take off for the horizon at the first opportunity, and keep goin'. And I don't know how we're to stop you."

"You needn't worry," Traynor told him, grimly. There was something in the plainsman's face then that precluded doubting him. "You couldn't drive me away from this outfit—not now. That was no grudge killing last night. Whoever did for the man you knew as Len Douglas, I can tell you it was tied in with something big—something a lot bigger than either you or I might dream of!

"And I'm sticking to this job to the end—'til the shape of it gets clearer, and we can see what sort of deviltry we're bucking!"

So the train rolled westward — twenty broad-wheeled wagons with their freight of human lives, the high boxes under the canvas tilts crammed with household furnishings, farm equipment, trade goods, and seed, for the fertile soil of Oregon.

Days dragged out. They left the Platte Valley, headed up the great sloping shelf of the Continental Divide. The broad meadow that was South Pass dropped away behind them, and the wide and broken plains of Wyoming where alkali made great white clouds of stinging smoke under the cutting edges of the wagon tires, or else lay deep as snow, the full moon of springtime upon it and on the sleeping night corral.

Jim Traynor rode his difficult trail. There had been no particular dangers so far to threaten the company; the Indians were docile that season, the weather mild. The emigrants, guided by Traynor's savvy, were spared a hundred mishaps. He knew the camping sites, the short cuts, and the handy, homely methods the frontier improvised for mending gear and equipment. Each day he ranged ahead of the crawling caravan, searching out the route, and seldom to return without fresh meat for their cooking pots slung across the withers of his bay gelding—meat that his long rifle brought down unerringly.

At least, the emigrants knew by now that their new captain would not desert them, was determined to see them through to the new land west of the far Cascades. He had earned Matt McKay's grudging respect, though the faction that sided with Ed Bronson had never relaxed their hostility.

Traynor was having his unpleasant thoughts about Bronson now as he forked his bronc through the long afternoon searching out a likely spot for the evening's corral. There had to be a limit, he thought, to the prodding a man could take; even though he had told himself again and again that he would be a fool to let the small-town lawyer's sharp tongue sting him into losing his temper.

Not with the murderer of Len Douglas still unnamed—a threat and a menace hanging always over the heads of the company.

Last night they had camped at Soda Springs; now the train was rolling its patient way across swelling plains made bright with the fair blooming camas. Matt McKay rode with Traynor this afternoon, Paul Shelby sitting saddle at the plainsman's other side. Traynor liked the young storekeeper who had defended him against the hanging-fury of the emigrants; though one of the greenest tenderfeet of the lot, Shelby had his own brand of courage and he was quick to learn.

AT THE CREST of a hill old Matt reined his bronc in, pointed ahead with a short, muscular arm. "I see the glint of water down there," he remarked. "A stream. Good place to camp, eh?"

Jim smiled a little, shook his head. "Ordinarily, yes, but not this time. If we were closer you'd see why. Orson Yates has his place down on that creek," he went on to explain. "The trees hide his buildings from here, and the acres he has under plow."

Shelby looked up with interest. "Yates? I think I've heard his name. A Mormon, isn't he?"

"Yes. There are a number of settlements of the Saints that have spread up this far north of Salt Lake. They trade with the traffic on the Overland, make a sort of contact between Deseret and the States."

A look of distaste showed on Matt Mc-

Kay's bearded face. "I never heard much good of them Mormons," he grunted, suspiciously. "Folks drove 'em out of that town of theirs, back home in Illinois—Nauvoo, it was called."

Jim Traynor shrugged. "I think you're biased, like a lot of other folks. Naturally there's bad Mormons—just like there's bad Gentiles. And it's easy to hate or fear any people that are different from us. But Orson Yates is a good friend of mine—which is why we won't make our camp where you suggested, and risk injurin' the crops he's got in.

"There's another place as good a couple of miles farther on. Tonight, some us can ride in and do a bit of trading with him, at his store . . ."

THE MORMON'S place was humble—one soddy to live in; another where he did business with the Overland traffic. A stock corral. A few acres under cultivation. Lamplight was gleaming fitfully across the darkness when the men from the train rode in that evening, and as a pair of dogs started barking, discordantly, a big man pushed open the door of the store and came out, calling the dogs sharply to heel.

The emigrants swung down from saddle, an uneasy silence on them. There were Matt McKay, Shelby, Ed Bronson, and another. Only Jim Traynor returned the greeting of the blond giant at the door, as he snubbed his bay gelding to the hitching post in the yard. "Evening, Orson," he said, quietly. Though it was months since they had met, their greeting was quite casual, after the manner of the frontier.

Then they had moved into the interior of the store, Traynor introducing the men from the train briefly. Yates spoke to each in turn, and, if he sensed the stiffness in them, or felt the stares of these mid-Westerners—most of whom had never seen a Mormon before—he did not show it. He was used to being stared at. He was indeed a big man; more than six feet-five and wide in proportion, and he had a keen eye and crisp yellow hair that fell to shoulder length. The tall, middle-aged woman behind the counter was his wife, Sophronia.

Before trading talk began, there was the usual preliminary discussion of news and trail conditions, the customary exchange of lonely men meeting in far places. This was interrupted suddenly by a renewed clamor from the dogs, and the clatter of hoofbeats running in from the darkness of the surrounding plains.

Orson Yates took this sound of new arrivals with a look of distaste touching his broad, pleasant features. "That'll be Bart Cullen, I suppose," he told Jim Traynor. "He and his boys come in about this time of the evening."

Traynor frowned. "Cullen? Is that crowd hanging around here?"

"Don't know what they're up to," the Mormon said. "They've been in the neighborhood more than a week now—have a camp back in the hills. They claim they don't like their own cooking and generally show up at night for my womenfolks to feed them." He went to the door as riders plowed to a milling halt in the yard. With his hand on the latch he halted to call briefly over his shoulder, "Jane!"

His broad bulk disappeared through the door; he had to stoop his yellow head a bit to clear the lintel. The dogs yapped incessantly. Rough voices of men shouted above their racket; there were the sounds of saddles emptying and horses being brought to a halt and tied. Then Yates was back, just as a girl lifted the blanket curtaining a narrow doorway to the soddy's other room.

She was much younger than Sophronia, and quite pretty. She had a plait of fine red-gold hair that shone in the lamplight. "Jane," Yates told her, with a note of disgust in his voice, "there'll be six of them again. You got enough coffee made, and venison steaks?"

She nodded shortly and withdrew into the kitchen without speaking, but not before Traynor heard a grunt from Ed Bronson and, glancing at him, surprised an open look of admiration in the lawyer's eyes. The plainsman's face went a little hard.

Now six men trooped into the room, dragging dust across the threshold onto the neatly swept floor. They were all of a definite type—the unshaven, unclean, loud-mouthed kind of tough that infested the grogshops of the Missouri border, the scrapings of a hard frontier. They all gave the emigrants, who were ranged over against the rough counter, a sharp and hasty surveillance as they filed in.

Cullen himself was last to enter—a squat, heavy-shouldered redhead who came through the door with a sidling, crabwise motion. His small eyes slid over the emigrants, coming unerringly to rest on Traynor's unsmiling face. He halted abruptly then, dislike flaming quickly to the surface in him.

"Hello, Bart," Traynor greeted him coldly.

Cullen's scowl twisted into a poor semblance of a smile. "Thought I knew that bay gelding—but I didn't expect to find you out this way. When'd you leave Saint Joe?"

"Sometime after you did, I reckon," Jim told him, noncommitally. He added, "What's the deal?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Cullen's answer when he gave it was unconvincing. "Oh, we're pushing on to California in a day or so. Right now we're just doing a little hunting while we rest our broncs."

"Oh?" Traynor exchanged a meaning glance with Orson Yates, who had ducked in through the low doorway behind Cullen. He let a smile touch his hard lips, shrugged briefly. "Nice vacation. . . ." he murmured.

"You hintin' you don't believe what I tell you?" Anger touched Bart Cullen, dangerously. His eyes fined down, stubby-fingered hands wiping slowly up his pants-legs toward pouched revolvers. But in the end he let the moment pass, jerking his head to toss rusty hair out of his eyes as he turned away from the plainsman.

"I'm hungry!" he growled. "Let's get that grub on the table, Yates. . . ."

III

THE TENSION broke as his crew hitched into position on the benches at the long puncheon table, three to a side. The men from the train watched them from over near the counter, Traynor without relaxing his wary caution. He knew this bunch very well and he was sure Cullen's lame yarn about hunting covered some unnamed deviltry.

A platter of venison steaks came in from the kitchen, bowls of vegetables, a steaming coffee pot. Jane moved lightly and soundlessly as she served the men, and it was noticeable that the half-dozen toughs refrained from the usual coarse remarks while she waited on them. Traynor knew why. He knew that big Orson Yates had a careful eye on the crew, every moment; and that Cullen and his men were aware of it.

But Traynor could also see Ed Bronson watching the young woman with the bright hair and the trim, lithe figure, his eyes following her keenly as she came and went. The plainsman did not much like this.

Yates had joined his wife, Sophronia, behind the counter and was dickering now with the emigrants, setting out bags of potatoes, coffee, and flour. Bronson said suddenly, "There's only one thing I mainly need. Got any good liquor on hand?"

The Mormon turned to him slowly, spread both huge palms upon the counter top. A slight smile touched his broad face. "Sir, I'm plumb sorry. But I don't use that stuff myself and I can't sell it to you either. You see, it's ag'in my religion—"

One of the men at the table let a loud guffaw of laughter strike through the room. "No luck, skinny," he called over his shoulder to Bronson. "His kind won't give you a drink or even a chaw of tobacco—that's why they call themselves Saints!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Bart Cullen growled.

But the other paid no attention. Out of one hip pocket he had pulled a half-filled bottle, drew the cork with his teeth and spat it out. He waved it, laughing roughly. "C'mon over here, bucko. I'll fix you up."

"Stay where you are, Ed!" Matt McKay warned under his breath. "Don't drink that poison! Wait 'til we get back to the train—there's a quart of good whiskey in my wagon."

The lawyer was thirsty now, however, and at sight of the bottle he wiped his grinning mouth on a sleeve, hitched up his jeans and eased across the dirt floor. Cullen's man poured the raw whiskey gurgling into a china cup, handed Bronson the drink. Ed took it and tossed it boldly down his throat.

He came up coughing and choking, doubled over with tears in his eyes and liquor streaming from nose and throat. Roars of laughter broke from the men at the table and with an angry growl Paul Shelby started toward them. Traynor

caught the storekeeper's arm, pulled him back.

"Don't interfere!" he said, crisply. "If Bronson wants to make a fool of himself, that's his lookout."

The lawyer had his breath, and was mopping his face on one sleeve, trying to grin a little, weakly, at his own discomfiture. The man with the bottle took the cup and filled it again, handing it back. "Take it easy, buddy! This pilgrim's whiskey's a little strong, the first try. Of course, when you get used to it—" To demonstrate he upended the bottle, drained off the rest of the rotgut and with a hearty gasp of pleasure flung the empty into a corner. "When you can take 'er like that, boy, you can call yourself a drinkin' man!"

"It's good stuff all right," the lawyer managed, gamely. He tried another tentative swallow, held it down, smacking his lips with exaggerated relish over the fiery burn it it.

At the counter, Matt McKay turned away with disgust written in his face. "The fool—thinkin' he can be a man with the rest of them! Well, looks like somebody's gonna have to drive his wagon for him tomorrow!"

They finished their dealings with Yates. There was not much to it, because the emigrants were low on cash; the supplies they bought could easily be carried to the train across the withers of their horses. Yet Cullen's crew were through first and the first to go, leaving the table a wreck of dirty dishes and slopped coffee and gravy.

Bart Cullen came over to the counter, paid for their meal with crisp bills he peeled off a roll that would choke a horse. Traynor's brows lifted as he saw the size of the wad. "In the money, Cullen?"

The redhead swung on him, jaw jutting forward. "None of your business, I reckon!"

"No, I reckon not." Traynor did not change expression. Cullen eyed him narrowly for another moment; then jerked his head at his men and the six of them tramped out of the room.

Matt McKay said at once, "You trying to make trouble?"

"Hardly!" Traynor answered. "But I'm always ready for it with that crew in the neighborhood—I know them! They're a worthless lot of border scum who'd do any dirty work for less cash than the roll Cullen is toting. Personally, I think it's good policy never to let that redheaded devil suppose for a minute that I'm afraid of him."

"Well, I'll admit you appear to have him buffaloed."

"And does Cullen hate it!" big Orson Yates added, with obvious pleasure.

The golden-haired girl came in from the kitchen again and started clearing away the remains of the feed. Ed Bronson, leaning his skinny frame loosely against a wall, watched her with eyes already gone a little glassy from the potency of the liquor he had drunk. From outside came the noise of riders mounting, of hoofs striking in the dust. And the dogs were yapping and snarling.

Suddenly the door burst open and Paul Shelby, who had stepped out to lash a sack of provisions behind his saddle, came at a run. He clutched the frame of the door, eyes wide and startled. "Traynor!" he shouted hoarsely. "Your bronc—they're takin' it!"

WITH A CURSE Jim Traynor headed for the door, dragging out a six-shooter as he went. He shouldered past the storekeeper, into the yard. Dust was drifting and swirling in the lamplight that fell through door and window. The plainsman quickly sidestepped to take his silhouette out of the doorway, and then, from the darkness, he could see more clearly what was going on.

Cullen's crew were in saddle and already spurring away from there, and the one at the tail of the group had Jim's bay gelding by the reins. But the bronc was putting up a fight, giving him trouble. Traynor let out a yell. He levelled his gun at the man, but dared not squeeze trigger for fear of hitting the bucking, plunging horse.

The bay was a good animal, and Traynor's rifle was in the saddle boot. He did not mean to lose either one to a member of Cullen's gang. He started to run along the front of the store with gun ready, running to get in closer to the man fighting the stolen bronc. From behind he heard the shouts of Matt McKay and the other emigrants as they came boiling out of the soddy, and the dogs, everywhere at once, were yelping themselves crazy.

Cullen and the others had hauled rein now some twenty yards ahead and were looking back, watching their partner's tussle with the bay. Jim Traynor knew they had seen him, too. At the last moment—almost too late—he caught sight of the thing that gave him warning.

There should have been six riders ahead of him, but in the starlight Traynor's quick eye could account for only five. Five men—The fact struck home just as Traynor reached the corner of the soddy. He could not stop himself then, but as he plunged forward he went into a rolling dive that saved his life for him.

A gun blast sounded as he cleared the building. It crashed almost in Jim Traynor's ear, so close he could all but feel the heat of it; and the weapon's flash was at the edge of his vision as he went down hard, the leaden slug ripping open the night across his back.

That bullet would have cut him in two, had he stayed on his feet. The man who fired it would have been so sure, in advance, of its effect that Jim could count on a few precious seconds of surprise. Hitting the ground he rolled over, once, brought up with one elbow against the hard earth and the gun in his hand lifting for his own shot.

He saw the ambusher then, standing spread-legged against the near wall of the soddy, his bronc tied farther back in the shadows. Jim did not give the man time for a second shot. He notched sights on the center of his chest and squeezed trigger, into the swirl of dust that swept around him, chokingly.

The man screamed as he went down, his body hitting the wall behind him and dropping prone. Traynor, with gun ready for another bullet if it should be needed, knew it wasn't. The tied horse gave a neigh of terror, broke its reins and drummed off into the night; but the ambusher lay still where he had fallen.

Traynor rolled to hands and knees, came lightly to his feet. He saw that Bart Cullen and the remaining four had given the thing up as a bad job and were on their way. The one with Jim's bay had dropped the reins at once when the shooting started and taken off without the frightened animal to hinder him.

Jim Traynor was beating dust from his buckskins when Yates and the emigrants hurried up. "Not hurt," he answered them. "Though it's a wonder I got a whole hide on me. It was a trap, of course! This gent by the corner of the buildings was set to get me when I came in sight, and then jump saddle and make his getaway with the others. Stealing my horse was just the bait—and I rose to it!"

Matt McKay said, "But why, Traynor? Why should Cullen want you out of the way?"

The plainsman shrugged. "You name it. Maybe Bart just dislikes me that much—or maybe it's something else, that it would be very important to know . . ."

But there was no answering the question. The gang was gone by now, and the one that had taken Traynor's bullet was much too dead to talk. When they turned him over they found it was the man who had given Ed Bronson his first swig of pilgrim whiskey.

Straightening up from the body, Jim Traynor looked at Orson Yates. "I'll leave him to you," he said. "You'll know a good place to plant him."

The giant nodded his yellow head. "If I was you—" he began, but he never finished that speech.

A CRY had sounded from the soddy behind them—a woman's voice, angry and frightened. Orson Yates' face went hard, and immediately his long legs were pumping in great strides toward the door. Jim Traynor followed hard after. He, too, knew what had happened when a quick glance showed him Ed Bronson wasn't in the group.

He entered just in time to see the young woman, Jane, facing Bronson with anger written in her pale, white face. Then Yates' big hand was closing over the lawyer's shoulder and he was jerking Ed around bodily. Bronson's bleary eyes had barely focussed on Yates when the Mormon's other hand came around in a powerful, open-palmed blow against the jaw, that sent Bronson reeling back against the wall, solidly. "Keep away from my wife, understand?" the big man thundered.

The slap had knocked the liquor fumes out of Bronson's head. He crouched against the wall, dazed. "You—your wife?" he echoed. He looked at Sophronia

Yates, who had just pulled back the curtain cutting off the kitchen door. "I—I thought—"

Suddenly the lawyer went very red in the face. He swallowed several times before he could speak again. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean any harm—a natural mistake—"

Orson Yates turned toward the golden-haired woman, demanded, "Did this man hurt you any?"

"Oh, no," she answered, quickly. "I—I was just frightened."

The big man nodded. "All right," he grunted. "We'll forget it, then—this time! Don't try it again!

Matt McKay stepped forward, took Bronson by an elbow and shoved him toward the door. "We better be gettin' back to the company," he growled, "before there's more trouble."

In a few minutes the men from the train were in saddle again. Traynor, with the bay gelding between his knees, reined over to the door where the big form of Orson Yates was framed, watching them. "Keep an eye on Bart Cullen," he warned quietly. "That devil is up to something, sure."

The Mormon nodded, slowly. "I'll be careful. And you better do the same."

"You bet." Jim lifted his hand in parting, kneed his bronc around and joined his companions. In a few minutes they had left the sod buildings, the lamplight and the clamor of the dogs, and the starry stillness of the prairie night closed around them. They rode to the music of saddle leather, and the broken rhythm of their broncs' hoofs.

Once Ed Bronson cursed, moodily. "I nearly got myself killed then!" he grunted. "Hell, I thought that second woman was his daughter."

There was a pause. Then Matt McKay said, "That right there is the main reason us folks in Illinois wouldn't have no truck with the Saints. But maybe Traynor is right. This Yates struck me as a right good man, and, if he's livin' up to his creed, and his belief, why—what more can we ask of him? It's our job to be tolerant of a thing we maybe don't quite understand, seems to me."

No one could find anything more to say on that matter, and they rode ahead in silence.

IV

SOMETIME CLOSE to morning Jim Traynor awakened. He came to all at once, as was normal with him, and by instinct one hand felt for the handle of a six-shooter and closed over it.

The corral was silent around him, embers of the night fires blowing redly. He listened, finding nothing to alarm him. Yet something had disturbed his sleep and he did not think he could have been mistaken. He thought now that it must have been the sound of a horseman approaching the sleeping train, the hoofbeats slowing to a walk and then halting somewhere beyond the wagons.

He came out of his blankets and began to make the circle of the train, keeping low in the knee-high prairie grass. The white Osnaburg wagon sheeting gleamed faintly under the starlight, but there was no movement or sound other than the slight noise of his own passage. Then a dark form rose suddenly before him. Low against the earth, he caught the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders and lifted his gun. But the man called hoarsely, "Who's there?" and Jim Traynor recognized the voice of one of the guards he had stationed, Paul Shelby.

Traynor identified himself and moved forward. The two of them crouched in the tall grass, conversing in low tones. "Seen anything in this quarter?" Jim demanded. "Heard any movement in the last few minutes?"

"Yes!" Paul whispered, excitedly. "A horse—moving in on the train. But it stopped and there's been nothing since, though I've watched and listened." He laughed a little, nervously. "When I heard you crawling up on me I got pretty scared, I tell you!"

They waited a long time together, straining eyes and ears in the heavy darkness. The normal sounds of night insects came to them, magnified out of normal loudness. But except for these and the deceptive sweep of a breeze through grass, there was nothing.

Jim Traynor grunted angrily. "He's still out there—we both heard him, so it can't have been imagination."

The breeze was freshening now, a faint ribbon of light beginning to strengthen at

the horizon to eastward. Gray morning was almost here.

"Could he be after the cattle?" Shelby suggested in a whisper.

"Not likely. The herd's over at the other side of the corral. But whatever he's up to, he means no good sneakin' in on us that way . . ."

Then, almost suddenly, it was day and the train behind them was coming to life. As the first light grew stronger and the land took on shape and depth, Shelby and Traynor studied the face of the prairie intently. They could find there no sign of the night prowler, or of the bronc he had ridden.

The two men looked at each other. "What the devil!" Paul Shelby exclaimed. "We *did* hear something, didn't we? Or is the damn train haunted!"

Traynor only grunted. Back in the corral, stirring with the new day's activities, he saddled his bay gelding quickly, and rode out on a search for sign.

In a dry coulee a couple of hundred yards from the corral he found plenty, and his trained eye read the story. At one point two horses had been brought in, held here for some time, then ridden away again. There was also sign of a lone rider coming into the hollow, dismounting, and—to judge from the straggling prints—turning his bronc loose to drift away of its own accord. There were human prints, too, made by ordinary boots such as anyone might wear.

Jim Traynor thought the whole thing over, carefully, while he rolled a morning smoke. Not much hope of following any of those prints, and not much sense in the delay it would entail. He shook his head finally and turned his bronc back slowly toward the train.

SOON it was afternoon, the day gone still and warm with the promise of summer. Jim Traynor, on a fresh mount, had left the wagons snaking up the length of a broad, grassy valley and was away into the bordering hills in his daily quest for meat for the outfit. They were some eight miles or more from the scene of last night's corral.

The plainsman had said nothing to anyone about the tracks he found, and had advised Paul Shelby to keep quiet about the disturbance in the night. There was no use in alarming the emigrants. But these things were not far from his mind as he threaded his way through scrub growth and rock. They spelled some nameless threat to the wagon train; they gave him a strange and eerie feeling that hostile eyes were on him now.

So strongly did he sense this that when the shot came he reacted to it almost automatically. He felt the whip of the bullet past him, knew at once that he was too exposed here to try fighting back at the unseen marksman. The latter had the range and it would be futile to drive his bronc ahead in an attempt to reach cover.

Instead, Traynor let his body turn limp and slid loosely from the saddle. The bronc cantered on, leaving him there with his face down against the rocky soil, but Traynor's short gun was in his hand, hidden underneath him. And every muscle was taut and waiting.

Almost at once he heard voices and a triumphant exclamation, "That did it!" Some other words were not loud enough for him to make out. He thought there must be two men, holed up in the rocks to his left. He was sure of this when he heard a second voice mutter, "Better make sure. I'll cover him while you go out and have a look, Doc."

Ice lumped inside Traynor as a scraping of boots on stone told him the one called Doc was heading for him. This was a hopeless situation; one word from Doc that he was still alive, and the man with the gun would finish him off; and, though he might take one of the pair with him, that held little satisfaction.

The footsteps crunched nearer. Traynor thought desperately that if he could get a hold of Doc's legs, drag the man down on top of him for a shield—

Suddenly the man halted, out of reach, and Jim waited for the yell that would give him away. But instead Doc grunted, "Aw, we're wastin' time. The guy's dead all right—I could tell by the way he hit the ground. You hit saddle and let Bart know we've took care of him. I'll collect his bronc and bring it in."

The other man did not argue. Traynor could hear him scrambling out of the rock nest where the pair had made their ambush, and a moment later the sound of a canter-

ing horse began and quickly died. Doc went over to Traynor's bronc, which had not moved far after losing its rider. He spoke soothingly, got the horse by the reins and came back leading it.

He found Jim Traynor rolled over onto one side, gun levelled, waiting.

Astonishment and quick fear washed over the face of the man. It was not a handsome face by any means. Doc had a full black beard, and weak blue eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses which didn't fit with the blue jeans and flannel shirt he wore, or the gun-handle jutting out from his holster.

Traynor came up to his feet now and, going to the man, lifted that gun and shoved it down inside his own waistband. Doc made no move to stop him, nearsighted eyes blinking and watering behind their thick spectacles. Jim Traynor said, "Well, Doc Hall! A long way from Saint Joe—for you and Cullen both."

The man swallowed. "What—what're you gonna do with me, Traynor?"

"I dunno, really. I killed the last man Bart set to ambush me. . . ."

Doc was showing signs of panic. "You wouldn't—wouldn't do nothin' rash?" He blinked at the levelled gun, back into Traynor's unyielding eyes. "Look!" he exclaimed, suddenly. "There's a lot in this—the makin' of all of us! Why don't—why don't you come in with us?"

The plainsman let interest show in his unsmiling face. "Come in with you? I don't savvy what you mean."

"It's big—like I say, it's plenty big. And what have you got to lose?" Doc Hall was almost babbling now, talking to save his life. "We know all about you and that emigrant crowd—how they were all set to stretch your neck for you once. There's no reason you should care what happens to them!"

"Maybe not, at that." Traynor seemed to be thinking this over, carefully. "But—what would I have to do?"

"You wouldn't have to do anything! Just stay out of sight for the next couple of hours and give us a free hand. I'll talk to Bart later, after they've wiped out the train. I'll see that he cuts you in—honest!"

THE COLD ANGER that swept Jim Traynor then almost gave him away. He wanted to close his hard fingers over Doc's bony throat. "Wipe out the train—?" he echoed. Then he got control again, and managed to put a touch of contempt into his voice. "With half a dozen riders?"

"You mean the ones you saw down at the Mormon's?" Doc shrugged. "That's only a handful. We got five times that many men ready for this play—I told you it was big. And there's power behind us, too. I understand it's a bunch of big shots in Washington put up the money to hire the crew."

"Washington?" Traynor stared, unable to comprehend this. "Eastern money, and an army of gunners—just to wipe out one poverty-stricken outfit of Oregon emigrants? It doesn't make sense!"

"I don't know any more about it than that. Except that we been waiting here for this train to come through. Bart and the same five men would ride down to the Mormon's every evening, to scout out word of any new outfits arriving and at the same time give the impression he had only a few riders with him. I'd stay in the hills with the bulk of the crew.

"We've got a go-between traveling with the outfit—in fact, it was him contacted Bart Cullen in the first place, and arranged for us to be out here waiting when the train showed. He's the one that's paying us; he knows the bloc of politicians at the Capitol that's footing the bill."

"Who is it?" Jim Traynor demanded, his tone almost a little too sharp. "What's the name of this—go-between?"

Again Doc shrugged. "I don't even know that. But he snuck away from the train last night and met Cullen, and got back to the wagons again before daylight. They made the arrangements for the raid.

"First thing was to get you out of the way—they both figured you'd give us trouble. So me and another of the boys was assigned the job for trailing you and putting a slug through you. The raid's scheduled for a half hour from now. This gent with the train is going to arrange someway to hold it up at a certain point in the valley down yonder, where we can get to it easy; and it's to be all stretched out in line of march so they can't fight us off. All we got to do then is ride down and wipe 'em out. There's to be nobody left alive."

"But man!" Traynor showed the shock he felt. "There's women, and children, with that train!"

"What of it?" Doc Hall grunted. "You said yourself they're just a bunch of poverty-stricken emigrants. I know *I* won't miss 'em. But there's big money wants 'em dead!"

For a moment Jim Traynor could not answer that—could only stare at Doc Hall and try to digest the horrible things the man had told him so casually and frankly. Apparently, Doc thought his story had done its work. He seemed no longer afraid of the bullet he had expected, at first, to come from Traynor's six-shooter.

The plainsman said, finally, "And your 'go-between'. What becomes of him?"

"Oh, he's to be the sole survivor—the guy that goes back to Washington and tells his story of the massacre. And then it goes in all the papers. There's to be one other witness, too."

"Who?"

Doc said, smiling a little, evilly, "Come along and I'll show you."

Jim Traynor hesitated for just a moment, thinking of a trap. But then he nodded and, with the gun on him, Doc led the way up past the rocks where he and the other gunman had hidden. In a hollow just beyond two horses were tethered in a clump of scrub-oak.

One of them had Doc Hall's saddle cinched on. Across the back of the other, slung belly-down, the body of a big man with long, yellow hair was lashed with limp arms and legs dangling.

"Orson Yates!" Forgetting danger, Traynor pushed past Doc Hall and went to put one hand upon the broad back of his friend. There was blood in the yellow hair, but he could feel the lungs swelling in the man's deep chest. No, Yates was not dead—

Doc Hall said softly, "Put up your hands, Traynor!"

It must have been a stingy gun hidden on the man's person, that Jim Traynor had missed in his quick search. For a long second the plainsman did not move, did not turn to see the weapon he knew must be leveled at his back. His own gun was still in his right hand, hanging now at his side. He had been a fool, and left himself open to Doc's treachery; the man had been stalling, talking, hoping for this moment.

But there was too much at stake now to let himself be captured.

Thinking like that, he made his try. Spinning, hurling himself away from Orson Yates' helpless body, he whipped the heavy six-shooter up for a hasty shot. He heard the *crack* of Doc's hideout weapon, felt a sharp burn of lead touching his side. There was no time to aim; before the other gun could bark again with beter effect, Jim Traynor squeezed trigger almost blindly.

With the crash of gun-flame the horses bucked and danced against their tethers. Traynor, unprepared for the kick of the gun in his hand, fell back and brought up against a boulder, ready to hit trigger again. But it was not necessary.

Doc Hall dropped his stingy gun and was leaning over it as though trying to pick it up. He crumpled then, rolling part way over. Jim could see sunlight glinting on the thick lenses of the steel-rimmed spectacles. He could see, too, the bloody smear his bullet had made of the gunman's bearded face.

V

CULLEN'S GO-BETWEEN had done his job well. Traynor realized that as he came pounding down the slope of the valley and saw the twenty wagons of the train strung out in a long, snake-like line of billowing white canvas, and not moving. There was no natural defense in that flat trough, studded with the bright blooms of the camas. It was too late now to try to shove the clumsy oxen into circle.

Hitting the level floor, Jim hipped around in saddle and ran a quick glance along the rim of the hills behind him. There was no sign yet of the raiders, but according to what Doc Hall had told him they would be coming at almost any moment.

Then he had reached the tail of the train, was hauling reins beside the last wagon. The owner, a lean farmer from Missouri, peered down from the high seat where he was resting; his wife put her head through the arch of the canvas top, a baby in her arms.

"What's the matter here?" the plains-

man demanded. "Why's the train stopped?"

The farmer jerked a thumb. "Broken wagon up ahead. Some of the men are trying to fix it, but it's got a crushed wheel and nobody knows what to do." He saw the look in Traynor's face, then. "Say, man, why the excitement? You look like—"

"Got a gun?" Traynor cut him off. At the farmer's startled nod he snapped, "Get it ready, and all your lead and powder! Put your woman and kids down inside the wagon bed, behind any shelter that'll hold off bullets. Hurry—no time for questions!"

He kicked the bronc and galloped on down the long line of wagons, relaying the word. "Be sure and hold fire until they get close enough for a good shot," he cautioned. "We can do a lot of damage with the first volley if we catch the raiders not knowing we're prepared for them. My shot will be the signal."

A knot of men clustered about the wagon with the crushed wheel broke and scattered for their own rigs as they heard the warning. Traynor gave the disabled wagon only a glance, and rode on to Matt McKay's outfit. From up on the seat a white face looked down at him, and he saw the glint of a gunbarrel. Allie had an old muzzle loader she had dug out of their equipment and was already ramming in shot and powder.

"Jim Traynor!" she exclaimed, her dark eyes wide. "You've been hurt!"

"What?" He looked down, saw the stain of blood upon his dark leather shirt. He shrugged. "I'd almost forgotten. It barely broke the skin!"

Matt McKay came running just then, a short gun in his hard fingers. "What is this thing all about?" he demanded, breathlessly. "Can't you give us an idea what we're backing?"

Jim Traynor only shook his head briefly, for at that moment the voice of Paul Shelby had sung out, "Here they come!"

It was, as Doc Hall had said, a small army. It fanned out as it rode into a long skirmish line. Silence clamped down over the train; it lay seemingly helpless and unconscious of the menace sweeping in upon it. But Traynor, glancing back along the line of wagons, could see tense faces and watching eyes, and the shine of ready weapons waiting for the raiders to come into range.

Cullen's men drew in, confident and unsuspecting. Jim Traynor raised his saddle gun, notched sights on the nearest rider, got ready to give the first shot which would be the signal for a volley all along the line of wagons.

His finger was just taking up the trigger slack when another rifle spoke from near at hand and at once every weapon in the train began firing—too soon! Traynor cursed savagely, lowering his weapon as the raiders broke their charge just out of range. He flung around, searching out the man who had fired prematurely and given the attackers warning, thus ruining that all-important surprise volley he had counted on.

He knew he had found his man when he saw Ed Bronson, and read the frightened, guilty look in the lawyer's eyes. "I didn't mean to!" Bronson began to stammer, as soon as he felt Jim's stare. "My finger slipped on the trigger—"

TRAYNOR wheeled away; the time to settle with him was later. For now the tide of horsemen was coming again and this time with guns spitting. Gunfire rattled up and down the length of the train, in a growing crescendo of battle.

Jim Traynor rode for the head of the line, where the center of the skirmishers was aiming. He flung himself from saddle there, hit the ground and rolled in between the wheels of the forward wagon. Flat on his lean belly, rifle and six-shooters handy, he could fire in either direction.

The skirmish line struck, folded in at the middle, and the raiders were galloping down either side of the wagon string, firing as they rode. Traynor worked his guns, quickly and methodically, and saddles emptied before the flaming muzzles. Behind him the emigrants' lead was also having good effect. But most of them possessed only single-shot rifles, while the raiders were armed with the latest style repeaters.

Traynor fired until his guns were empty, and then by the time he had fresh loads shoved into rifle and six-guns the last of the horsemen flashed by him. Pouching the two short guns and with the hot metal of the rifle in his hands, he scram-

bled out from under the wagon where he had forted up.

Still bodies heaped loosely on the hard ground showed the damage he had done; but most of the raiders had got past him and now, all down the length of the train, wild confusion ruled. Horsemen galloped up and down on both sides of the wagons, firing through dust and gunsmoke at the emigrants who, up in the high seats, fought to keep their ancient weapons loaded and return the deadly fire.

Traynor saw a steel-jacketed shell take one gray-haired emigrant; the man screamed and flopped lifeless, the Sharps rifle slipping from his hand. But next moment the dead man's wife, leaning from the shelter of the wagon canvas, saved the weapon before it fell to the ground and snapped open the breach, trying to reload it with shaking fingers. At that the man who had killed her husband gave an oath and, leaping from his saddle, clambered in to finish her, his gun ready. A six-shooter in Jim Traynor's hand bucked then and the killer staggered, his spine broken by the heavy slug. He clutched at the edge of the canvas, spilled down over the big wheel and flopped to the earth.

It was a mad mixing of shouts and screams and gun-sound. Near Jim a steer took a slug and went down bellowing and thrashing in the yoke. That shot had been meant for Traynor— And there was Bart Cullen, riding for him head-on. He had lost his flat-topped hat and the sun glinted dully from the red hair that whipped about him at shoulder length. His mouth was a black hole in his face, shouting curses. He fired again, but the slug was wild. Jim's six-shooter bucked in his fist and through a quick filming of powder-smoke Traynor saw the renegade snap erect, fling wide his arms as he slid backward over the pony's rump and hit the earth bouncing.

From above him Jim Traynor heard Allie McKay's voice, calling his name. He looked up, saw her pretty face and disheveled hair, and the gun smoking in her tight fingers. "Jim!" she cried, through the racket of the fighting. Her firm brown hand pointed his attention to a new direction, and a new danger. "Look, Jim! More of them coming—"

Traynor whirled to see a new force of riders bearing down on the stalled wagon train, weapons ready for action. But then a yell of triumph broke from him as he recognized the big, yellow-haired man in the lead.

It was Orson Yates, and he answered Jim Traynor with a quick lift of the hand, pounding past him with his grim followers at his heels. "It's the Mormons!" Jim shouted up to Allie through the dust their passage raised; then he was off on foot to get his bullets into the fight.

New fury had entered the conflict as the new arrivals poured their lead into it. Visibly, the raiders wavered as the Mormons struck, catching them between their own guns and those of the emigrants on the wagons. Caught in a whipsaw of snarling lead, the renegades turned in desperation to their leader.

Then one of them found Bart Cullen, dumped lifeless in a welter of his own blood—

Fight went out of them, suddenly, and in a few moments the battered remnants of the raiding party broke and headed in panicky flight for the safety of the hills; and many of the broncs that ran with them had flying reins and empty saddles. . . .

VI

WHEN A FIRST GRIM TALLY of the dead had been taken, and attention given the needs of the wounded, the company assembled again for council under the guidance of their gray-bearded leader, Matt McKay.

There were gaps in the ranks now, and more than one emigrant woman watched the scene with eyes that were blurred with hot tears and the pain of her man's loss. But the coming of Orson Yates and the Mormons had saved the train from what would otherwise have been a hopeless massacre. Matt McKay turned to Yates now and he took him by the hand.

"I don't know how you happened to show up when you did," he said, "or why you even came—when it was people like us who drove you and your kind from your homes and sent you into the wilderness. But we're beholden to you, just the same."

The yellow-haired giant closed strong fingers over his, in friendly grip. He did

not smile. He looked at Jim Traynor, and he said, "I think it's time for explanations, Jim!"

And Jim Traynor spread before them briefly the whole gruesome story, as he had pieced it out from what Doc Hall had told him.

"There's a traitor in your outfit," he told them, "a man who deliberately plotted with Bart Cullen for this attack. He and Cullen both were in the pay of powerful interests back East, that wanted the wealth Brigham Young and his Saints were taking out of desert land everyone had thought was worthless. This massacre was to be staged to look like a fanatical attack by Mormons against a Gentile wagon train; Orson Yates' body would be left behind and no man, woman, or child still alive to refute the yarn that the traitor—as sole survivor—would take back to the States with him, and tell Washington and the press.

"There's enough suspicion against the Saints, anyway, that a thing like this could have been used to shove the United States into a war of annihilation—and, under cover of the turmoil of such a war, the Eastern interests could have moved in and taken over the wealth of this Territory for themselves.

"I know it sounds fantastic! Yet you'll remember I told you, from the first, there was something big behind the things that have been happening."

Orson Yates added, his words falling on the horrified stillness of the group, "The reason the plan didn't go through was because of Traynor. He scotched two attempts on his life and, after they'd taken me prisoner, he found me and turned me loose to bring my people and help stop this massacre. It was him organized your train so it could defend itself. You people owe him plenty."

Matt McKay said slowly, "And once we were talking of hanging him!" He turned, looked sharply at Ed Bronson. "Seems to me that was your idea, Ed!"

The lawyer turned crimson. He wiped a hand nervously across sandy mustache. He stammered, "I—I was sure he'd killed Len Douglas—"

"Allie McKay!" As Jim Traynor called her name the girl came forward. He said to her quietly, "The time's ripe to tell them what you wanted to, before. I wouldn't let you then because I wanted to keep the real killer feeling safe, in hopes he'd overplay his hand. But you can speak now."

She faced the council, and her eyes were shining with the joy of saying the words that would clear Jim Traynor of the charges against him. "I don't know who killed Len," she told them. "But it wasn't Jim Traynor! You see, I overheard their quarrel, that evening when Jim caught up with the train. I learned then that Len Douglas was really Len Traynor—Jim's brother!

"There was a minor charge against Len Traynor, back in Saint Joe, and he was scared. He left town with the train; Jim came after him to try and force him to return and face a trial. But Len said he wouldn't go back. Since joining the outfit he'd stumbled onto the scent of something really important, and he couldn't leave. Nor would he tell Jim what it was, because he felt his life was in danger and he wouldn't drag his brother into the same thing. That's what I heard them talking about that day."

McKay finished for her. "And in the night Len proved he was right—because of course it was this traitor who murdered him, knowing Len had found out the truth about him. But we were going to let Bronson harangue us into hanging Jim Traynor for the murder, until Shelby pounded sense into our skulls!"

Ed Bronson tried to draw back into the crowd, at this. Angry eyes were on him. And old Matt was saying, "Jim, can you name this man that sold us out for blood money—and prove it?"

"I think so!" Jim Traynor moved over and he slapped one hand against the box of the disabled wagon. "Whose outfit is this?"

"Why, it's mine," Paul Shelby answered promptly, moving forward. "The wheel gave, going over a rock, and none of us knew how to fix it."

Jim Traynor knelt and studied the wreckage of the wheel, with the heavy box tilted down upon it. Suddenly he stabbed one brown finger at a broken spoke and called sharply, "Just take a look at this!"

They all came closer and stooped to peer closely as he indicated. "How about it, Bronson?" Jim's glance speared the law-

yer as he snapped out the words. "Was there a saw used on those timbers or not?"

Bronson, gone suddenly pale, stammered, "It—it looks sort of like it! Now that you point it out—"

"Too blind to see it yourself?" Traynor snapped. "The traitor, whoever he is, fixed that wheel when no one was watching him, so it would break down and stall the train for Cullen's attack."

Matt McKay straightened suddenly. "But—good Lord!"

"What is it?" Traynor demanded.

"Why, I saw Paul Shelby with a saw in his hand today, while the train was halted at noon. I heard him under the wagon, using it, and at the time I wondered what he was up to—"

WITH A SCREAM of rage Paul Shelby whirled on McKay, a six-shooter leaping into his hand, his eyes blazing sparks of hatred. But before the storekeeper could pump lead into his accuser, Jim Traynor had moved in with silent speed. One hand clamped down on Shelby's gun wrist, and with the other fist he slammed a blow into Shelby's sunburnt face. The gun roared, slamming its load harmlessly into the dirt; then the man went limp, dropping the weapon, and Jim Traynor caught him and propped him against the side of the wrecked wagon.

Then Traynor stepped back, whipping out his own gun and leveling it on Shelby. The storekeeper faced the weapon with panting body half-doubled, hair stringing down over his face, blood staining his battered mouth. "Now talk!" Traynor barked. "And tell the straight truth or I'll shoot it out of you.

"The only reason you saved me from hanging that day was because—as you said then—there was no one else could take the train West for you. But just as you had killed my brother, so you aimed to get rid of me when you had used me. Last evening at Orson Yates' you found Bart Cullen, but the trap the pair of you cooked up for me there failed to come off. And you had arranged to hold a meeting during the night.

"It was easy enough to sneak away from the train, during your hitch on guard; all you had to do was meet one of Cullen's men who had a bronc waiting for you in a draw near the corral and, when you came back, to turn the horse loose, crawl in quietly, and put on an act for me when I happened to wake up and heard the sound of the bronc.

"These people you planned to murder were your friends, Shelby—folks who'd shared their food and their fire and their medicine with you, and stood side by side with you through the perils of the trek. And all the time, not knowing the thoughts you were carrying inside your head—you filthy, crawling renegade—"

Paul Shelby wilted suddenly, buckled at the knees. He dropped down to the earth, huddled there with head bowed. "Don't—don't!" he begged. A long shudder convulsed him. "It's true! Write it all down and I'll sign it. I'll tell the names of the men who hired me. I'll tell it all—"

Turning on his heel, Jim Traynor holstered the gun and moved away as Matt McKay and the rest closed in. He shoved through the crowd, suddenly very tired and feeling the great weight of the burden he had been shouldering these past weeks. Ed Bronson appeared before him, a look of shamed humiliation on his face now.

"I've acted like a damned fool, Traynor," the lawyer told him. "I've done nothing but make trouble, from the start. And my carelessness with a rifle this afternoon warned Cullen and almost lost the train! All I can say is I'm a mighty sorry gent, Traynor! I'll try to do better!"

Jim Traynor smiled briefly, shook the hand the grateful lawyer offered him. But he was too tired for speech and the bullet streak across his ribs was hurting again. He found a wagon tongue and eased his weight onto it. He dragged off his hat and ran a buckskin sleeve across his brow.

At that moment a voice spoke Traynor's name; looking up quickly, he saw Allie McKay. And the sweet light in her eyes as she came toward the plainsman, then, took the weariness from him, and filled him with a deep content.

LITTLE MAN – BIG NAME

They were riding merrily along one morning, when—

But it wasn't his size that troubled famous Christopher (Kit) Carson, leader of the mountain men—he sought something he was in no position to enjoy!

BY BLAINE WORTH

THE MAN'S FINGERS caressed the smooth stock of an old rusty rifle, as he stood a little apart from the crowd of trappers thronging around the door of Ewing Young's house and barroom. This sandy-haired man whose slightly stooping shoulders and heel-less moccasins all conspired to make him seem even shorter of stature than he really was, cradled his father's old Flintlock in his arms as fondly as though it were the young of one of the wild creatures he had come to know.

His ice-cool eyes changed until they were cold—dead cold as a stone. And as any of Kit Carson's friends would have known, a decision had been made—a not too pleasant one, either! For his father's old Flintlock was his last treasured possession of many from which he had parted for the price of a few meals. And now again it was the demanding hunger under his belt along with the knowledge of biting wintry winds soon to come, and the need of a heavy woolen shirt that drove him to this decision to part with the rifle. Probably it would raise a little cash to get him over the trail to Santa Fe and safely joined up with a wagon train making tracks for the East.

Inside the house, Kit shoved the rifle across the bar to Ewing Young. "It's yourn if ye'll give me a few dollars fer it."

Kit waited calmly, while Ewing Young

looked at the boy and wondered if his cold, blue eyes mightn't depict a born Indian-fighter.

"Wal, son, if ye've got any idees about back tracking to Missouri, why don't ye git 'em out of yore head and join up with me? Thar'll be Apaches to larn whose country it is and beaver to trap. What d'ye say to that?"

The tingling excitement and trembling that went through the body of the boy Kit Carson at these words of his friend were not in evidence to the eyes of the onlookers. His hands remained steady and there was no change of expression on his ruddy face. Yet Ewing Young's offer made this one of the most important occasions of his life.

His words of acceptance were in his usual slow drawl, but the heart inside his breast was crying loudly, "You are a man now, Kit Carson! You're going to be a mountain man at last!"

He found a secluded corner away from the curious Mexican eyes of Taos and allowed his thoughts to run riot with the joy of what had just happened to him. He fingered his new skinning knife and knew that the tiny letters on the blade spelled Green River, even though he could not read.

Born Christmas Day in 1809 in Kentucky, Kit was one of ten sons born to a pioneer father, who, even before Kit was a year old, had pulled stakes to settle in Missouri. The boy who was to become a lawyer, according to his father's ambitions, was finally apprenticed to a saddler in Franklin, Missouri, after his father's death and never even learned to write or read!

There, at his work bench, was born and nurtured the great ambition of his life—to be a full-fledged mountain man, to raise hair and trap beaver, and to swagger as the men he idolized swaggered while they waited in his saddler's shop and swapped tall tales.

KIT CARSON sat his pony proudly and happily as he rode the trail to Raton Pass as one of Ewing Young's men—one of forty trappers! And so began his career, a career which was to be one of the greatest in the history of the West!

These trappers, in their full-skirted

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hunting coats and buckskin garments, cut dashing and romantic figures at the fandangos or dances which the Mexican settlers had. At intervals, these men who scorned the settlements and possessed a hearty appetite for the dangers of the wilds, returned to Taos or Santa Fe for a spree, and spent the money from the hard-won beaver skins freely and extravagantly on liquor and smiling, dark-eyed señoritas.

Kit Carson was always broke at the end of these intervals and immediately joined another expedition, gladly giving his knowledge and experience with Indians, his skill and prowess as a hunter in exchange for a living wage.

The kill and butchered flesh, the smell and sight of blood were every-day occurrences to Kit. He was familiar with and ever wary of trouble, and the kind of life he led made him half as much of a savage as the Indians he fought. The horrors of killings and Indian massacres rarely impressed him unless it was the cold-blooded killing of his own comrades and friends. Even then, it was only the cold determination of revenge which affected him!

He calmly scalped the Indians he killed and counted coup with them as the Indians did on the white men. They were trophies and therefore accounted for another shiny brass tack being driven into the stock of his rifle.

The various tribes and Indian chiefs knew him and acknowledged his bravery, considered him to be a worthy warrior of the white men. The Cheyennes, the Utes, the Blackfoot, the Comanches, the troublesome Apaches and the peaceable Arapahoes—all had encountered him and all had felt their losses.

Once when Yellow Wolf, chief of the Cheyennes, was smoking with Kit in the council room of Bent's Fort, the old chief arose, began making strange motions and in choking syllables said to Kit, "My son, I give you a new name which you have won. Your name is Vih'hiu-nis, Little Chief!" Among the Indians, this name always stuck to Kit.

For all Kit Carson's reckless squandering of money, he began to long for his own band of chosen trappers and consequently the added profits derived from it. He was undoubtedly qualified to be a leader of mountain men, and finally, a trip to the desert provided the necessary money.

The famous band, known as the Carson Men, was formed. The foremost members were the six famous trappers among whom were Joe Meek, Bill Mitchell, Kit, and the three Delaware Indians—Jonas, Tom Hill and Manhead. Later, as Kit's band grew, he employed fifty men.

It was the original six, however, that participated in one of the most amazing and exciting battles of Kit's career. They were riding merrily along one morning, swapping tall stories with gusto and many guffaws, across the broad, flat plains in the sun.

Suddenly, one of the men yelled, "Indians! Swarms of 'em!" and pointed toward a little knoll not far in the distance. "Hundreds more'n likely," Kit drawled, calmly. "I reckon we're in a spot!"

There was no shelter of rocks or timber for the little band of men to turn to, and so they waited to see what the Indians were going to do.

"Maybe them Comanches will count coup on us this time," said Joe Meek, grimly.

Kit's eyes had gone stone cold again. "Not without a fight they'll never forgit!" he answered.

"Down with the mules, boys, here they come!"

With the throats of their mules slit and their bloody carcasses in a circle, the men threw themselves down behind this scant protection and made their guns ready for the attack.

Yelling their war cries, urging on their ponies, their naked, painted bodies gleaming in the sun, the Indian warriors charged.

But in those days the Indians had not been supplied with rifles by the white man, and their bows and arrows and hatchets were their only weapons.

In the fray, they lost their chief and best council men, their horses refused to cross the bodies of the dead mules so they could leisurely scalp their victims, and finally Kit and his men slipped away through the night and made tracks for camp!

WHEN KIT was twenty-six—a well-seasoned trapper and an acknowledged leader of mountain men—he began to long for as many comforts of home as could be had in the wilds and the wandering life he led. Perhaps he wanted his home fires lighted by some other hand than his own, stiff with cold after a long day's treck.

At any rate, he became infatuated with a young Arapahoe Indian girl named Waa-nibe, Grass Singing. He was forced to fight a duel to death over her with a Frenchman named Shumar, who had a tremendous physical build and bullied all the trappers in his company.

Kit counted this victorious duel a coup and hammered another brass tack in his rifle stock.

He married the beautiful, gentle Waa-nibe and lived happily — being presented in time with a baby daughter whom he named Adeline.

After only a few years, however, Kit came home from the fall hunt and found his Indian wife dying of a fever. Neither the medicine men of her tribe nor the medical knowledge of the white men Kit knew could save her, and at last he was left alone with little Adeline. He grieved greatly for Waa-nibe and the love and beauty in life she had brought to him.

However, after a time of hunting and more Indian scrapes, loneliness again seized Kit, and also the need for someone to care for the motherless Adeline.

He took as his wife, under the Indian marriage custom, a young Cheyenne girl named Making-Out-the-Road. Quick tempered and selfish, this haughty Cheyenne girl was indeed not the mate for Kit Carson, and certainly no fit stepmother for Adeline. Her own baby died a month after birth, and finally she left Kit for an Indian warrior.

It was on his return trip from Missouri where he had taken Adeline to live with relatives that he met John Charles Fremont, and joined his expedition to the Rocky Mountains as guide.

Throughout all his wanderings, Taos had been home to Kit, and he had returned there for a brief holiday as often as he could. And it was here that he was married for a third time—to Josefa Jaramillo, a fifteen-year-old girl. She was vivacious and beautiful, but fulfilling his duties with Fremont and General Kearny's Army of the West, Kit was able to visit Josefa only four times in the first six years of their marriage.

For in the war with Mexico, Kit Carson served as Lieutenant of Scouts and was also commissioned by Fremont to carry the mails through to Washington for three years, for which he received no pay. Now, for the second time, Kit attempted to settle down and farm, but duty called again—this time as Indian Agent among the tribes he knew so well, trying to quell the fear and hatred imbedded in their hearts by white men ignorant of their savage natures and stupidly untactful.

Then came the Civil War, and immediately Kit Carson joined the Union forces and began service as Lieutenant-Colonel of the First New Mexican Volunteer Infantry. He was sent, as usual, to fight the Indians, and he did so — thoroughly and competently. His conquest of the Navajo tribe is one of his greatest accomplishments and the Battle of Adobe Walls against the Comanches was indeed a victory of which to be proud.

The fame of Kit's daring and courage and the adventures of the "Carson Men" grew with each of his exploits. He had become a national hero of the West while he was in the prime of life.

Books were written about him, but he could not read them. His greatest literary accomplishment was to scribble the letters of his name.

His last years were not happy ones. Josefa died in childbirth and left him with a large family, whose responsibilities he shifted to relatives. Then he took his sick and worn-out body of Old Fort Lyon, where he spent the rest of his days among friends. There was only the end to wait for, and when it came, he was at peace smoking his old clay pipe and talking over old times with his compadre.

It was swiftly over. "Remember," he choked, "bury me beside Josefa. Adios!" And he was gone!

In May, of the year 1868, so died General Christopher Carson, Indian fighter, veteran of two wars and pioneer of the old West.

A tremendous explosion rocked the boat. The startled leader swiveled around.

CLAY DUTTON swung stiffly from the dust-caked coach of the Butterfield Stage into the yellow sunlight that lashed the wide street and adobe buildings of Colorado City. The heat stabbed through his gold-buttoned coat and he raised his visored cap, with its anchor insignia, to let a little air circulate through his sun-bleached hair.

At the base of the bluff the silty Colorado wound like a twisted brown rope through the sage hills of the desert. Far away the slanting sun outlined the low buildings and parade grounds of Fort Yuma.

Clay's fingers fondled the letter of introduction in his pocket and he recalled how Captain Dan Parker had summoned him into the shipping office overlooking the levee in Saint Louis.

"My old friend, Brett Sumner, is in some kind of jam. He asked me to recommend a skipper for his boat out there," Parker had said. "You're the man for this job, Clay. You're always lookin' for new horizons."

Now Clay shaded his eyes from the glare and looked up the crowded street. The team of broncs on the stage reared up,

STEAMBOAT ON THE DESERT

By RAY VICKER

He knew the Mississippi, did Clay Dutton—every shoal and snag. But in this raw land the shoals and snags were human—tricky and vicious enough to rip the very bottom out of life.

suddenly, and Tom, his gray-haired Negro servant, drew back in alarm. Instinctively Clay threw up an arm as Tom bumped against him.

"Shame!" a girl exclaimed behind him. "Striking a helpless Negro."

Clay whirled, gaping. A slim and rather pretty girl was looking at him with eyes that sparked with hostility.

"I'll get dem ol' bags, massah," Tom mumbled, missing what the girl had said. He darted agilely toward the rear of the stage.

The girl blew a wisp of coal black hair back from her frowning forehead. "Master, huh? A slave in Arizona! Don't you know this Territory is free?"

Clay's fingers tightened on the gold watch chain on his vest. He could feel that stubborn streak rising in hot waves up his backbone. No need to explain what was none of her business. "Do you start preachin' at every stage?"

She drew back. "You might at least keep a civil tongue," she retorted.

A SHORT, thick-set man detached himself from the drifting pedestrians on the walk. The sun had darkened and wrinkled his sweating face until his cheeks were like two greasy rumpled brown paper bags. "What's the matter, Rita?" he asked the girl. "This fellow botherin' you?"

"This fellow was beating his slave when I objected." Righteous wrath radiated from her like the heat waves from the baking adobe buildings.

"Looks like everybody in Arizona has a long nose," Clay mused, casually brushing the dust from the pants that were tucked into patent leather boots.

"You're smart, aren't you?" the man said, softly. He carelessly pulled back his frock coat, clearing the revolver butt in his belt.

"No, Jay!" The girl thrust herself between them. Clay tensed with the sense of elation that always sharpened his emotions when danger threatened.

Then something akin to recognition kindled in Jay's eyes. He looked at Clay keenly and said, "I'll see you later, Mister."

Puzzled, Clay watched him depart with the girl on his arm. He was a stranger here, and yet Jay had appeared to recognize him. Or had Clay been wrong when he thought he saw recognition in the man's eyes?

He put those thoughts from his mind, perused the letter of introduction with the letterhead of a southwest bank. "Looks like I'll have to contact this lawyer, Mr. Gird, and find out where I can locate Captain Sumner and my boat," he mumbled to himself.

It was an hour later that Clay found the lawyer's office at Main and First Streets near Modesti's store. A dingy stairway led to the upstairs office.

Clay blinked as he stepped into the cluttered room. For a moment he thought he had stumbled into a musty antique shop, with its collection of miniature tables, porcelain, wall tapestries, and Navajo rugs.

A short, thick-set man hunched in a swivel chair at a carved oak desk, back to Clay. He was idly catching flies and feeding them to a tiny green lizard squatting on the blotter. The reptile's long red tongue streaked in and out like flashes of fire.

"Are you Mr. Gird? I . . ." Clay stopped, eyes widening. He found himself facing the stranger he had met in the street.

The lawyer nonchalantly dropped the lizard into a drawer of his desk and eyed Clay. "Jay Gird is my handle hereabouts." He spoke as if he might have had different names in other places. "You must be Clay Dutton."

Clay glanced at the revolver near Gird's elbow and smiled wryly. "Looks like you been expectin' me."

"I'm not lookin' for trouble with you," the lawyer grinned. "Soon as I recognized that steamboat rig of yours I knew you were the man I needed."

"The letter I got said to look you up, that you were the agent for Captain Sumner and his boat."

"Captain Sumner won't have the *Queen of the Colorado* for long. I'll have her in two weeks," Gird explained. "That was Sumner's daughter you met this afternoon."

Clay wasn't interested in the girl. But he was interested in the threat hanging over his command. "Supposin' I go see this Captain Sumner?"

Gird stared out the window at the red mist that floated in the sunset over the flat roofs of the adobe buildings. "I want you to work for me, not Sumner," he said, softly, "and I usually get what I want."

Clay's gaze drifted around the cluttered office. "Looks like you want some mighty queer things," he said, stalling for time to find out what was behind Gird's offer.

Gird grinned, picked up a tiny porcelain vase. "Ming dynasty," he explained. "I picked it up in Frisco after a Chinaman tried to deal me a blackjack hand from the bottom of the deck. I bought the vase to remind me what happened to the Chink."

Clay felt a tension in the room, as if the heat of the dying day had sucked all air from the office, leaving a dry vacuum.

Gird pointed to a feathered tomahawk. "An Apache shot a horse from under me in Tonto Pass. I trailed that buck for five days before I finally got him—and that tomahawk."

"And now you want to add me and Sumner's steamboat to your collection."

"That's a crude way to put it. But if you toss your chips in with me you'll rake in a nice pot."

"You're talkin' to the wrong man, Gird." Clay didn't understand why the lawyer should be double-crossing his client but he knew he belonged on Sumner's side. He stood up, stretched his long frame.

The lawyer rocked slowly back and forth in his swivel chair. "That's some cap you have, Dutton," he said, finally. "It would look nice hanging from that deerhorn over there."

"I reckon I can hang onto this cap yet awhile, Mister," Clay retorted. He turned and strode out into the gathering gloom.

KEROSENE LAMPS sparkled through a warm dust haze and shirt-sleeved men idled along the walks. The town sat on a granite bluff overlooking the river and Clay could see a cluster of lights at the base of the hill. That could be the steamer moored at the wharf. He started toward it.

He recognized the blurred outline of a twin-stacked, stern-wheeler steamboat ahead of him. In the darkness he felt his way onto the creaking planks of the wharf.

Suddenly men surged all around him. Something hard collided with his skull. Stabbing pain knifed through his head. He swung savagely at a silhouette and felt the solid smack of his knuckles on flesh. He stumbled, overwhelmed by numbers. Another blow smashed against his head.

The last thing he remembered was someone shouting. "Get his hat!" Then he felt himself falling. Water closed over his head.

The shock of his immersion jerked him from his lethargy. He regained consciousness to find himself floundering in the dark and muddy waters of the river. He strangled the cough that threatened to explode from his lungs and silently treaded water. Above him on the dock silhouettes dissolved into deeper shadows.

Clay reached for a slimy piling, and then slipped back into the water. The current caught at his body, sucked him under. He came up sputtering against the hull of the steamer.

Desperately he clutched at the anchor cable, cried out for help. The river swept him against the heavy links of the chain. His head collided with a shackle. Dizziness fogged his brain. His fingers lost their hold.

Then firm, friendly hands grabbed his shoulders. Like a landed garfish he was dragged onto the pine deck. A lantern flashed into his face and a gray-headed, bespectacled figure bent over him. Several roustabouts gaped. He caught sight of Rita Sumner's slim frame near the steam donkey.

"Funny time to be takin' a swim," the white-headed, stoop-shouldered man said. His squinty blue eyes twinkled.

Clay blinked the silty river water from his eyes. His hand groped for his missing cap and memory of Gird's threat came back with a rush.

"I wasn't swimmin'," he muttered. He didn't mean to be caustic, but thought of Gird sharpened his tone.

Hostility rushed into Rita's eyes. "He probably was drunk. That's the slaver I was telling you about, Dad," she said, coldly.

"Drunk!" Clay exclaimed. He glared at her as he unsteadily climbed to his feet.

"Don't let Rita get under your skin, stranger. She allus was good at givin' out free advice and personal opinions," Captain Sumner laughed good-naturedly.

His rugged, seamed features were stamped with indefatigable optimism, as if he were everybody's friend. "The only man she can get along with is Jay Gird," he added, chuckling to himself at the color that leaped into Rita's cheeks.

Clay glanced at her sharply. "At least he's a gentleman," Rita retorted. "That's more than I can say for other people I have met."

Clay stiffened. Immediately he revised his intention of explaining his suspicions of Gird. If this sarcastic female was crazy enough to fall for someone like the lawyer, then it was up to her to find out what he was like.

"Stick to your gentlemen, then," he said. "I didn't ask you to put your nose in my business."

Captain Sumner slammed his paw against his thigh. "You don't give an inch, do you, stranger? I like yer spirit. I can use you on this boat. Want a job?"

"That's what I came here for. I'm Clay Dutton."

"Oh!" Captain Sumner's face lit up. He brushed a hand across his eyes as if to wipe away a film and peered at Clay.

"I have the letter of introduction in my pocket," Clay explained. His fingers groped in a damp pocket and he frowned. "I must have lost that letter in the river."

"Shore! I'll bet you did," a heavy voice intruded with sarcasm. A big, broad-shouldered man with black whiskers shoved himself forward. The thatch covered the lower half of his face until his head looked as if it were thrusting upward from a ball of burnt grass.

"Now, Pete, don't get suspicious," Captain Sumner chided. Then to Clay, "This is Pete Burch, my mate."

"Nice story about losin' that letter," Burch leered. "You look more like a gambler than a riverman to me."

Clay clenched his fists and would have swung had not Rita intervened. "Don't try any of your bullyin' tactics on board the *Queen*. Pete is right. If you are a riverman, prove it!"

Clay's temper snapped. "Listen! I traveled two thousand miles to take this job and ever since I arrived folks have been trying to make me regret it. That's just why I'm goin' to stay."

Captain Sumner's faded eyes beamed. "Let's hear you box the compass for them, son."

Clay grinned mockingly at the girl. Now he was in his own element. "North, North by East, North North East—."

"That's enough." Captain Sumner's smile broadened. "What's the number of the buoy marking the turn at Jefferson Island above Saint Louis?"

"There *is* no buoy," Clay answered. "We always steered by the old water tower on the Missouri side."

"You're a riverman all right." Captain Sumner slammed Clay on the back, thrust a horny hand forward. "Shake, boy. You're in command of the *Queen* right now."

He faced his daughter. "Get some of my dry clothes, Rita, and you, Pete, trot down to Denny's and get a quart of corn. This calls for a celebration."

CLAY broke into a grin. He liked Sumner instantly and for a moment he contemplated blurting out the story of Gird's treachery. Then he hesitated. The word of a stranger like himself would never be accepted over that of a friend such as Gird seemed to be. Clay could best help Sumner by keeping silent and bringing that cargo of bullion through within two weeks.

Rita stepped forward, brushed back a ringlet of jet black hair with an impatient gesture. "One thing more, Mr. Dutton. You may have command of the *Queen* but you'll never take that slave of yours on

board as long as I have anything to say."

A tolerant glint flickered in Clay's eyes. "I never did have a slave. I gave Tom his freedom the same day I bought him in New Orleans."

She gasped. "Why didn't you say so before?"

"Because it wasn't any of your business."

"You—you—!" She turned and ran as if unable to face him any longer.

SHAME rippled through Clay, but only surface ripples. The hard core of his obstinacy remained untouched. He hadn't asked her to intrude in his affairs. Nosey people deserved to be put in their places.

His remorse departed as he donned the dry clothes that Captain Sumner provided. The Captain didn't waste any time. He led Clay around the boat, explained the layout of the hundred-ton, high-pressure steamer.

Darkness obscured the peeling paint and, in the shadows, the *Queen* had the graceful lines of a Mississippi packet. But the drab furnishings of the salon contrasted vividly with the glittering color and trimmings of the passenger boats Clay had always known. The cold boilers and the still paddles contributed to the air of decay and dilapidation. A good boat once! But sadly neglected.

"Freight's fifty dollars a ton on the Colorado," Captain Sumner said. "This boat will bring in a fortune when she gets goin'." His eyes roved about his steamer with the bright eagerness of a prospector staring at a rich stake.

"Don't listen too much to what father says," Rita interjected. She had trailed behind them on the tour of inspection, sulking, and now she made a pretty picture in the lamplight standing by the great wheel in the pilothouse, russet dress closely following the smooth curves of her graceful figure.

"All Dad ever sees is the bright side of things. If we don't complete a trip to Hardyville in two weeks we'll lose the *Queen*."

Sumner grinned sheepishly and leaned with his gnarled hand on the compass binnacle. "Soon as I pay off that loan to the Southwest Bank we'll be on top of the world."

"Two weeks isn't much time," Rita reminded.

"Two weeks is fourteen days." Sumner's optimism remained undimmed. "Meantime a little corn won't do any harm."

Clay politely refused the invitation and Sumner shuffled down the companionway to the main deck where the roustabouts were carousing. Clay leaned over an Army Engineer's chart of the river to hide his embarrassment at being left alone with Rita.

"You don't like me, do you?" she asked, with an abruptness that caught him off guard.

"After the way you been actin' I'd say the feeling was mutual."

She brushed his retort aside with a flick of her slim fingers. "Please let's not fight." All the fire had departed from her lithe frame and her eyes were misty when her gaze slipped past him to the moonlight painting a silver pathway across the brown waters of the river.

"What do you want to do? Bury the hatchet—in my skull?" Even now his stubborn pride was slow to relent.

Tears poised on her eyelids. Clay gulped, and the thought came to him that her eyes were the soft shade of brown sage at sunset, clean, wholesome, and good for a man to look at.

"I didn't mean to be rude," he mumbled.

She wiped the mist from her eyes. "We're going to lose the steamer and that will break Dad's heart."

"He doesn't seem to be worrying much."

"You don't know Dad. Always chasing rainbows and putting money into get-rich-quick schemes. He owns part interest in a mine at Prescott, a share of a store at Ehrenburg, part of a ranch near Phoenix, and this boat. None of his investments are clear. Now he's reached the end of his rope. When this boat goes, everything else goes with it. That would kill him."

"Is there anything I can do?" His voice had become curiously gentle. Something drew him to this girl. He wanted to see her happy, full of life, with a gay smile on her red lips.

"Yes! Bring the *Queen* back from Hardyville with that bullion. We can earn enough on that trip to clear the note the bank holds."

That devil of perverseness in his char-

acter again reared its head. "Then you can marry Jay Gird and live happily ever after."

Her head jerked up. "Whatever I do is no concern of yours." She withered him with a glance before she marched out.

Clay could have kicked himself for his slip of tongue. For some reason he craved the good will of this wisp of a girl. She was so unlike any woman he had ever met.

Gird's treachery was clear in his mind now. No doubt the lawyer controlled that bank loan and didn't expect Sumner to meet the obligation. Slyly the lawyer acted as Sumner's friend while he maneuvered to take over the potentially profitable boat.

IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS Clay worked hard at getting the small steamer into shape. Roustabouts stacked piles of cedar faggots on the open main deck. His hard-swearing Scotch engineer labored over the wheezing engines. Booms were re-rigged. Decks and bulkheads glistened with a fresh coat of gleaming white paint. Tom, his colored friend, had come aboard and transferred the galley into a glittering haven of delicious and melting aromas.

Rita studiously avoided him. Several times he saw her at a distance with Gird. Clay meant to speak to the lawyer about that attack, but Rita clung too closely to Gird's arm. Clay held his tongue. He didn't want her to continue to think he was nothing but a bullying troublemaker.

Every day the lawyer strolled to the dock with a cheery word for Captain Sumner, a cold nod for Clay, and warm smiles for Rita.

Then one day Clay suddenly came upon Gird and Rita holding hands on the poop deck close under the blades of the stern paddle. Rita jumped up, face flushed with the pretty guilt of a misbehaving schoolgirl.

At sight of the proprietory grin on Gird's olive complexion Clay's control snapped. He strode resolutely up to the lawyer. "I've been meaning to drop around to your office, Gird," he said. "I'd like to know if my cap is hanging on that horn in your office."

Gird climbed to his feet. "I'd be glad to have you come around—anytime."

"What's this all about?" Rita glared at Clay. "Is that all you do? Pick fights with people?"

"With some people, yes." Clay glued his eyes on Gird, hoping the lawyer would crowd his luck. "Gird's the snake in the weeds who's buckin' your dad."

Rita drew back, eyes round. Then she placed a trusting hand on Gird's arm.

"The Arizona sun seems to have left your friend touched in the head, Rita," Gird said, levelly.

Rita glanced at Clay with scorn. "He's no friend of mine."

"Maybe not." Clay's jaw set stubbornly and he wondered why her blunt statement should stab so deeply. "But as long as I'm captain of this boat Gird stays off."

"Jay is a friend of mine," she retorted. "He can come whenever he likes. What's more, he is leaving with us tomorrow for Hardyville. He has business up there."

"If he does I won't be in the texas," Clay said quietly.

Rita stood stock still as decision formed behind the brown curtains of her eyes. Clay saw then the precarious thread upon which his job was hanging. Triumph widened across Gird's swarthy features.

"If you fire me, you'll give Gird the best chance he ever had," Clay cut in quickly. "I'm the only man who can bring this steamer through for you."

She glared at him for a moment. Then the fire died away. "You win this time, Mr. Dutton," she said. "But see that you don't overplay your hand."

Gird flung his cigar into the silty stream and shuttered his eyes until they were two bloodshot pinpoints that stabbed at Clay. "I'll beat the boat by takin' the trail to Hardyville. But I won't be forgettin' this, Dutton."

HALF of the population of Colorado City had come down to the dock to witness the departure of the *Queen of the Colorado*. Steamers were still a novelty to these rough Westerners and bets mounted high that the contraption would blow up before rounding the first bend. Others wagered a snag would rip out her eggshell bottom on the first mile.

Captain Sumner pointed amusedly at the blanketed Indians who lounged on the bank. "First time I came up the river

with my stacks smokin' all the Indians for miles beat it for the hills. They spread word around that the devil was comin', blowing fire and smoke out of his nose and kickin' water back with his feet."

Clay grinned, mind only half listening. Just like Sumner to be joking at the start of a voyage that meant so much to him. Clay's own eyes were roving anxiously about the decks, looking for the trouble that he sensed was coming.

Strange! He'd never worried too much before when on the bridge. Now he realized it wasn't only because of his stubborn pride in his own ability that he wanted to bring the steamer through. He felt that by doing so he could force Gird into the open, let Rita see for herself what kind of man she had picked.

Nothing untoward happened as the *Queen of the Colorado,* with a hiss of steam and a groaning of engines, swung her prow away from the dock.

Like the horns of a steer, platform booms pointed upstream. A swirl of muddy water caught the bow. The boat shuddered to a standstill against the strong current. Clay jerked "Full Ahead" on the bell and the vessel slowly picked up speed. Colorado City and the rust-colored banks of the stream slipped by like two never-ending ribbons.

Clay stood by the helmsman, eyes continually alert for the snags and hidden bars that menaced the fragile hull. This was nothing like the Mississippi where shadows on the surface revealed danger below. In this mucky water two inches or twenty feet appeared the same chocolate brown.

Deckhands leaned over the bow with pike poles, fending off floating logs and drifting brush. The hand lead never had a chance to dry as a lean, cadaverous roustabout, continually plopping the heavy weight into the copper swirl, sang out the Marks and the Deeps.

Several times during the course of the day the *Queen* trembled to a halt and decks shivered with futile power as the paddle wheel threshed on a bar. Clay found good use for the boat crutches. Mile by mile he drove the steamer forward.

It didn't take him long to see that Pete Burch, the rough, surly mate, knew little about steamboating. Twice Clay had to erase faulty bearings that Burch laid down on the chart. Captain Sumner doddered in the wheelhouse trying to be of assistance, but his failing eyesight made him a burden. It became more apparent with each mile that Clay alone could bring the boat through on time.

WHEN THE SUN reddened the mountains to the west Clay wondered if his fears had been unfounded. Perhaps Gird trusted to nature alone to slow up the *Queen* and give him possession of a boat that could mean a fortune.

At dusk the steamer tied up to a gnarled cedar that thrust bony fingers from the bank. Clay tapped the barrel of whiskey on the boiler deck for the half-naked, sweating firemen, and sent the crew of woodcutters foraging for more cedar logs. Campfires glowed under the clear, starlit sky.

Pete Burch took the first night watch and Clay turned in for some much-needed rest.

The moon had come up, a pale silver ball in a sky dusted with stars, when a frantic shout aroused Clay from a brief slumber. Sleep fled from his eyes. He glanced toward the sage-dotted shore. A chill shivered through him when he saw naked trunks of saguaro and clumps of octillo slipping by.

"The mooring line's parted!" somebody yelled above the stomp of hurrying feet on deck. Kerosene lamps burst into flame. Frightened curses blistered the cool night breeze. Men lined the rail, staring futilely at the racing banks.

Clay jumped up. With no steam in the boilers the *Queen of the Colorado* drifted helplessly in the clutches of a merciless river. At any moment a snag might stab through the hull, hurl the boat into a floundering mass of wreckage and screaming men.

Clay thought of Rita and gripped the helm with nerveless fingers. Cold perspiration dripped down his forehead into his eyes. He fought the river with all his strength but the helm obeyed with the sluggishness of a clumsy raft.

Then Clay felt Rita's tense fingers on his arm. "Dad's below helping the engineers get steam up," she whispered.

Even as his conscious mind battled with the river, his subconsciousness grappled with the problem of her nearness. She had flung a knitted shawl over a pink night dress

that fell in glimmering folds about her slim body. The moon and her fears paled her cheeks, accentuating the lustre of her smooth dark hair, and Clay found himself wondering crazily if those ringlets would feel soft to his touch. The river gave him no time to find out.

The next hour was filled with agonizing minutes when the steamer rushed down on upthrust snags, only to sheer away at the last moment. Twice the boat nudged the bank, then slithered back into deeper water.

A wheezing puff from the engines announced the arrival of steam. With smoke belching from the stacks Clay finally brought the steamer under control. The boat fought like a roped stallion for a few moments, then succumbed to the mechanical genius of man and became an obedient plowhorse.

"Where's Burch?" Clay inquired, when it was safe to pass the wheel to the helmsman.

"Burch was on shore drinkin' with the woodcutters last I saw of him," the quartermaster answered.

DAWN spread pencils of silver and gold across the Eastern horizon when the *Queen* again reached the campsite. A new mooring line snaked ashore. The boat bumped against the bank, exhausted by her mischievous escapade. Clay bitterly examined the slashed strands of the parted manila.

Clay met Burch at the gangway when the crestfallen mate shuffled aboard. "Guess I should of looked at that line," Burch apologized. "She was all wore out."

Clay's eyes bleaked and he gripped the rail to hold back his anger. "Let's see your knife, Burch," he said.

Before Burch's slow wit had digested the request he had slipped his long blade from his beaded sheath. He eyes narrowed when Clay passed a finger across the edge.

"Even the sharpest knife dulls up going through a two-inch manila line, Burch," Clay said, softly. "You should have remembered to sharpen your blade after that job."

Burch's tongue snaked out, lolled along his dry lips. Nervously he ran a big hand through his unkempt beard. Lips moved silently as if his dull wit were repeating Clay's accusation. Passion blazed into his beady eyes.

"Damn you, Dutton. You don't belong on this boat anyway," he cried. His heavy body lurched across the deck.

Clay dropped the knife, stepped nimbly aside. He'd served his apprenticeship in the rough and tumble school of the river. He knew how to handle his fists. His first blow caught Burch on the side of the head, staggered him.

Burch sank to his knees, thick lips spitting blood. Big fingers groped on the deck, found the knife. A triumphant bellow escaped from his powerful lungs. Rita uttered a cry of warning that rang pleasantly in Clay's ears.

The blade flashed in the dawning sun, ripped across Clay's arm, slashing his uniform coat. Clay slammed a hard blow home into Burch's paunch. He jumped back against the bulkhead as Burch clumsily mowed air with his weapon.

Again Burch charged. Clay's wide eyes fastened on the knife, body frozen against the wooden framework of a life preserver bracket. Rita cried out in horror.

The knife slashed down. Clay jerked to one side and the blade buried itself hilt deep in the wood. Burch frantically struggled to free the weapon.

Clay's fists hammered like five pound mauls into Burch's middle. Burch wobbled on his feet, eyes glazed. He became a doughy mass that collapsed in a heap on the deck.

Clay glared down at him. "Get up! I'm givin' you a full canteen and provisions. Your legs are carrying you out of here. Go back to Gird and tell him you failed."

THE *QUEEN* got under way early. Clay was lounging across the sill of the open pilot-house window when Rita slipped beside him. There was a hesitant friendliness in her bearing, as if she wanted to offer the first overtures of peace. His heart beat faster at the thought.

The desert gleamed in the sunlight, a glaring expanse of reds and yellows and browns all heaped together into a vast jumble of color. Occasionally a clump of mesquite brightened the stark nakedness of lonesome cactus and sage and arrow weed with an oasis of green. A brutal country! And yet made attractive by the

presence of this slender girl at his side.

"I think you're wrong about Gird," she began. The momentum of the steamer stirred up a breeze that whipped color into her cheeks.

"I know I'm right," he replied. "If Burch had beached us this morning we would have lost more than two weeks getting clear."

"I don't want to be always fighting you. Dad and I are grateful for the way you saved the steamer." She held out her hand. "Let's be friends."

His tanned fingers wrapped tenderly about her small white hand. "Sort of an armed truce, eh?"

"Call it that if you wish. I hope that you feel it is just a little more."

A call from her father interrupted the progressing conversation. Clay watched her go with an emotion that he couldn't put into words. She was a girl worth fighting for, with fire and spirit and looks.

The *Queen of the Colorado* chugged doggedly up the river. Pichacho and Ehrenburg drifted by, lonely river posts in the vastness of the desert. On the fifth day the clapboard and adobe buildings of Hardyville lifted out of the barrenness of sage and mesquite. The flat roofs lay parched and stark against the unending folds of the Arizona hinterland. Acrid fumes from a smelter tainted the dry air, withering what little vegetation there was.

A company of Federal soldiers met the boat at the rickety, cedar-pole dock and a four-horse dray rolled down the bluff, great wheels braked on the steep slide, axles squeaking with the heavy load of gold. A quarter of a million dollars! Enough to tempt every outlaw in the Southwest.

Clay breathed easier at thought of the Army's protection on the return trip. He was almost ready to believe Gird had been licked.

His exultation was short lived when he saw Gird on the dock, the only immobile figure in all that tumultuous movement.

Clay watched with smouldering eyes as Rita tripped lightly down the gangway, a tempting figure in a pink muslin dress with a gay parasol to match. She and Gird walked arm and arm up the dusty bluff toward town.

Clay pitched into his work to drown his ill humor. The cargo came aboard. The burly stevedores handled the bullion tenderly, as if they carried delicate instruments instead of heavy boxes of gold bars. Avariciousness glittered in many an eye. The rifles crooked in the arms of the soldiers discouraged any undue curiosity.

Except for the incident of a half-drunk miner who stacked his equipment and two bags of blasting powder next to one of the boilers, nothing untoward happened. Clay had the blasting powder transferred to a storeroom at the stern of the boat.

By nightfall everything was secure for the homeward trip. Captain Sumner bustled aboard at midnight, bursting with plans for investing his money in the thriving town of Hardyville when his steamer provided him with more capital.

CLAY slept little that night. Rita had stayed in town all day with Gird, and, somehow, Clay couldn't banish her from his mind.

Morning found the dock deserted except for a whittling old timer who loafed on a piling. The company of blue coats had vanished.

"Apaches burned a ranch ten miles out, last night," the grizzled lounger explained. "The troop headed into the desert after them Injuns."

Anxiety furrowed Rita's forehead. "That's bad. We won't have any protection on the way down. Maybe we had better wait over another day for a new escort."

Clay stiffened. His mind, already irritated by jealousy, settled into obstinacy. "I'm running this boat. We're pulling out in an hour."

Maybe they should have waited. With five days left to complete a three-day journey an escort would have been worth the wait. But Clay didn't intend to take advice from a snip of a girl without sense enough to stay away from Gird.

Rita looked at him, a hint of tragedy in her dark eyes. A cold wind blew between them, as if his acrimony had swept away their blossoming friendship.

"Nobody can tell you anything, can they? I only hope your bull-headedness doesn't cost Dad his boat." There was no resentment in her tone, only disappointment.

Clay knew she was right. The knowl-

edge made it only that much harder to admit the foolhardiness of his stubborn pride.

"Don't worry your pretty head so much, Rita," Captain Sumner chided, gently. He had a pad and pencil and was figuring how much money he could raise to invest in the new deals he had on his mind.

With the swift river providing a negative slip for her paddles, the *Queen of the Colorado* skimmed the rippling flood like a sprinting stallion. The brushy banks raced by in an endless flow.

The first night they docked at Ehrenburg and chopped up an abandoned livery for fuel. The second night the lights of Pichacho glowed brightly astern of them. When on the third night the steamer nudged the bank above Black Sands, Clay was sure of victory. He purposely avoided the logical campsite at the ford and picked a more remote post in the shadow of a high bluff.

"We'll camp here for the night and be in Colorado City tomorrow afternoon," he said. There was no elation in his voice. Curiously there was no joy in Rita's eyes either when she nodded. Only Captain Sumner clapped his hands in glee. Everything satisfied him.

"I'll break out another keg of whiskey for the roustabouts, tonight," Sumner boomed. "They've earned it."

Fires blinked into life on the shore. Tangy woodsmoke blued the twilight air. The hollow ring of axes sang from a clump of gnarled cedar on the knoll. Bare-chested wood-cutters trundled armloads of fresh fuel to the boat.

Clay should have known better than to lull his suspicions to sleep when he stretched on the leather settee in the pilothouse. But ten days of tedious work had worn him down until he was nothing but a bundle of frayed nerves crying for sleep. He closed his eyes.

He awoke with a start, the sound of gunfire in his ears. At first he thought he was dreaming the explosions. He lay back, blinking into the darkness.

A pencil of red streaked from shore. A loud report caromed from the bluff to convince him he wasn't dreaming. He jumped to his feet, twisted the wick of the shaded lamp. He reached for his Winchester.

"I wouldn't do that!" A harsh voice rasped at his elbow. Clay faced a shining blue revolver in Pete Burch's hand. A wide leer covered the ex-mate's brushy face.

Clay slowly raised his hands. Men scuffled on the deck below. Several more shots punctuated the cool night. Then silence reigned.

"We got everything under control, Burch," a voice called up the companionway. A tall, lean gunman unceremoniously herded Rita and Captain Sumner into the pilothouse. Clay breathed easier to know she was safe.

Burch grinned from ear to ear. Were it not for his hard, cruel eyes, he might have been mistaken for a benevolent Santa Claus. "Behave and nobody will get hurt," he growled. "We're after the gold and we're gonna get it."

A pale dawn brightened the East. Clay made out a dozen masked figures in the haze. He searched for Gird's short body among the armed men holding his roustabouts at bay. Only Burch was unconcealed. No mask could have hidden his long beard.

"This is the way you repay me for all the favors I did you," Sumner said bitterly.

"Shut up, you old fool, or I'll let you have a slug now."

Rita moved to her father's side and wrapped an arm about his sagging shoulders. Clay flushed under the accusing glance she flung at him. He read her mind. Had he waited another day for an escort, Burch would never have dared attack with his band. Clay's own stubbornness had steered the boat to disaster.

Burch spat a wad of tobacco onto the clean deck, wiped the drippings on his sleeve. "Sure is a good joke on you folks," he mocked. "The soldiers go chasin' Apaches while they leave the gold unguarded."

A ripple of amusement stirred through the desperadoes and one of them chimed in. "With a few feathers and some paint we made a nice raiding party, didn't we, Burch?"

CLAY felt sick inside when he read the tragedy in Rita's pale cheeks. He himself was responsible for this calamity. And now it was too late to right matters. Or was it?

"Get this steamer going, Dutton," Burch ordered gruffly. "We're ridin' her down to

Black Sands. We figured you'd camp there overnight and that's where the mules are waitin' for this gold."

"We have a bad boiler," Clay protested. He snapped a warning glance toward Captain Sumner.

"Can't help that. We're takin' her down anyway. We can't lug that bullion in our saddlebags."

With a gun muzzle at his chest, Clay had to comply. He did, however, gain time for breakfast. After searching all night for the steamer, Burch was perfectly willing to take time for coffee, bacon, and biscuits.

Clay drained the cup of coffee that Tom brought to the wheelhouse and gave the orders to cast off. The old Negro, regarded as harmless, was allowed to roam at will about the vessel with his huge coffee pot and pan of biscuits. Now he patiently waited to refill Burch's cup.

Burch stared suspiciously at the roustabouts coiling a line on deck. Clay bent over the chart, hastily scribbled a note. He caught Tom's eye, dropped the paper into the pot.

"You got us licked, Burch," he said, dejectedly for the ex-mate's benefit. "But I'm afraid of those boilers. You know what'll happen if they blow up."

"We'll risk it," Burch said gruffly. "I don't scare easy." Even as he spoke his gaze slipped down the companionway to the boiler deck where the bare-chested firemen were stoking the fires.

With guns at their backs the crew of the boat obeyed Burch's orders. With a clatter and chug of engines the *Queen* puffed southward. Once, when the engineer blew out his boilers, Burch jumped a foot off the deck at the sudden hiss.

"Those boilers may go at any moment, Burch," Clay said with concern. He sneaked a glance to Captain Sumner.

The Captain was quick to catch the hint. "Maybe I'd better keep an eye on the pressure," he muttered.

"Go ahead," Burch motioned with the barrel of his gun. "We're almost there."

Three masked horsemen were visible at the ford, herding two dozen pack mules and the string of horses.

A bar of fine volcanic black sand cut across the river leaving only a narrow channel through the shallow water.

At Burch's order Clay swung the steamer toward the bar. The paddle wheel kicked the blunt prow onto the shoal. The three riders drove the reluctant mules into the two feet of water, up the platform, and onto the steamer.

One of the new arrivals, a short, squat fellow, with a black silk handkerchief over everything but his sharp blue eyes and swarthy forehead, was obviously the leader. He snapped a few crisp orders and the gang leaped to work ripping open the boxes containing the gold bars. Clay realized he had to work fast.

His lean jaw hardened when the black-suited leader of the gang swaggered up to him.

"Before we go I'm settlin' a score with you, Dutton," the fellow growled in a clipped voice that Clay thought he could recognize.

"You want to give yourself a reason for keepin' my cap in your office, is that it, Gird?"

The outlaw tensed and his denial had a flat ring. "Guess you got me mixed up with someone else," he muttered. "But that doesn't matter." A derringer slipped into his hand.

"No!" Rita cried. "You have the gold. What more do you want?"

"Him!" The man pointed the derringer at Clay. A cold spasm gripped Clay's stomach. His mouth became a dry cavern that echoed the thump of his heart.

The pistol clicked faintly. The hammer slid back.

SUDDENLY a tremendous explosion rocked the boat. The biting tang of powder floated in a blue film on the main deck. A steampipe hissed with the fury of a released demon. The frightened mules brayed, and stampeded over the side.

"The boat's blowin' up!" Clay yelled in a voice that carried the length of the vessel. Masked men scrambled over the low bulwark and dived into the shallow water. Yells and curses ripped from terrified robbers.

The startled leader of the gang swiveled around. At that moment Clay pounced upon him. His first blow smashed into the fellow's unprotected middle. He followed with a snapping left to the jaw that ripped the mask from the man's face ex-

posing Jay Gird's moon features. Before Gird could recover Clay had knocked the derringer from his fist, sent it spinning.

Clay jerked around, yelled to Captain Sumner. "Keep our own men aboard. Start the engines! Quick!" The boat had to be clear of the bar before the frightened gang recovered their wits. Thank heaven a few of the roustabouts had sense enough to pick up some of the rifles abandoned by Gird's gang in their hectic flight.

A quick glance around told Gird the story. A savage scowl twisted his features into a mask of hate. He leaped toward the wheel, whirled the spokes hard over toward shore.

Clay grabbed at Gird's powerful fingers, dragged at the helm. Already Burch was reforming his men on the bank. Clay had to get control of the steamer.

Revolvers cracked from shore. A few of the hardier roustabouts answered with rifle-fire.

A smashing right knocked Gird from the helm. Clay frantically spun the wheel, caught a blow that rocked him to his heels. Ignoring Gird's flailing fists, he twisted the rudder amidship. Too late he saw Gird measuring him for a roundhouse right.

The steamer lurched, slid into deeper water. Thrown off balance, Gird missed.

With a bellow of rage he threw himself on Clay. Toe to toe the two men slugged it out. Smashing blows cracked on flesh with dull, sickening smacks. From the corner of his eyes Clay saw Rita slip behind the helm to steer the boat.

Gird grunted and backed away as one of Clay's driving rights sank deep in his middle. In the short lull that followed both men glanced anxiously toward the shore. Burch and the gang, now mounted, charged across the shallow ford, guns spitting.

Gird's yell of triumph snapped Clay around. "My boys will soon be here," he snarled. "Then we really will blow this teakettle to kingdom come." He charged Clay with a two-fisted attack that sent Clay back against the binnacle.

Guns blasted from the advancing riders. Bullets thudded into the thin planks of the steamer. A slug smashed a pilot-house window. Glass shattered onto the deck. Instinctively Gird ducked. For one moment his unprotected jaw thrust outward.

Quickly Clay stepped forward, swung. His blow jerked Gird upright. The lawyer's mouth sagged open. His eyes glazed, and he sank to the deck with a low moan.

A rifle roared at Clay's elbow. The bewhiskered Burch tumbled from his saddle as if he had run into a clothesline. At the window Tom's ebony features broke into a sunny grin.

"Ah neber did like dat man, nohow," he mumbled, leveling the rifle again.

The hard-riding band reined mounts, hesitated. With Gird and Burch gone the backbone was taken away from the gang. While they paused the steamer puffed safely into deep water.

"We have Gird anyhow," Clay declared. The crestfallen gang was spurring toward shore. "He'll probably do some talkin' before we're through with him. Then we'll round up the rest of those devils." Two roustabouts roughly dumped the lawyer into a rope locker.

Clay placed a grateful hand on Tom's shoulder. "Today you more than earned the freedom I gave you, Tom."

Tom showed his teeth in his good humor. "Ah sho enuff was scared foh a while," he confessed. "Ah dried dat coffee pot like yoh said and poured in some ob date blastin' powdah wid a cap. Just enuff to make a powahful noise and no damage."

CLAY GRINNED and followed Rita onto the wing of the bridge. Above them the stacks of the steamer poured a billowing black cloud into the sky. Decks throbbed with the vibration of engines.

A wave of color swept into Rita's cheeks when Clay leaned over the rail at her side. She had never looked so lovely. "I'm sorry, Rita," he said, gently. "I know how much you cared for Gird. But I think it's better for you this way."

Surprise widened her eyes. "I never did love Jay. I'd begun to suspect what you told me some time ago. But you were so bull-headed that I just couldn't agree with you. I kept fooling myself."

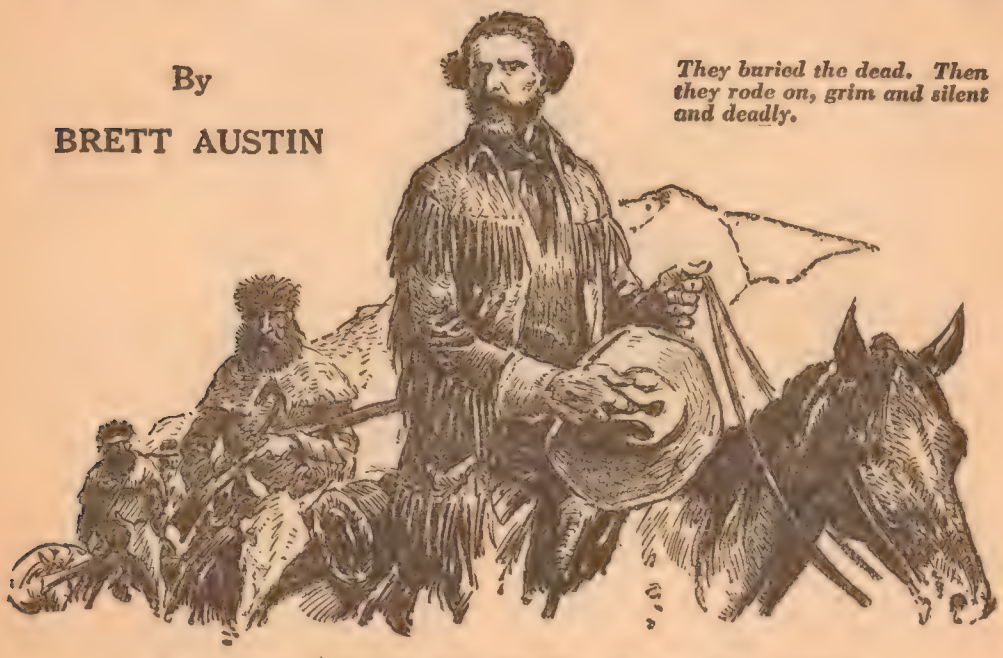
"I guess I was bull-headed," he admitted. He reached for her hand, held it lightly in his own. "It was jealousy."

"We won't have anymore of that." Her eyes bathed him with a soft, tender glow.

White Beaver, Frontier Scout

By

BRETT AUSTIN



They buried the dead. Then they rode on, grim and silent and deadly.

Dr. Frank Powell lived among the Indians, fought by their side, shared their very lives—but no white man dared call him renegade.

THE INDIAN GIRL was delirious. She lay on a pile of buffalo skins in the tepee of her father, Rocky Bear. Outside, braves chanted the death-song. Tom-toms pounded in hollow rhythm. Painted braves stomped and swayed and rattled gourds filled with shot.

"She is my daughter, Muz-zas-ka," said Rocky Bear. "For many days she has been with fever. Now she cannot speak except to talk like she is crazy. Can you heal her, white man?"

The white man said, "I can."

The old chief's grooved face lightened. "That is good," he said. "Your medicine is powerful. What do you do first?"

"Get those braves away from here," said the white man. "Make them stop that infernal racket. That's enough to kill anybody."

Rocky Bear went outside. The dancing and the tom-toms stopped and the white man went to work. A man of medium height, he was broad of chest. He wore buckskins and his hair was long.

He knew that Muz-zas-ka had a prairie fever. He had, in his bag, certain medicines to combat this disease. Inside of a week Muz-zas-ka was sitting up. She was well in a month. Chief Rocky Bear studied the white man with a solemn respect.

"I owe you a great debt, white man."

"You are my friend, Rocky Bear."

"You have saved my daughter's life. To you, I give my white beaver skin. You shall be known as Shoppa-ska, which means White Beaver."

But White Beaver did not leave Rocky Bear and his tribe. He rode with them on their forays. They were a band of homeless Indians—that is, they belonged to no certain tribe. They raided the Cheyennes and the Araphoes and stole their horses and other possessions.

White Beaver, because he was a medical doctor, was very valuable to the outcast tribe. He was also a deadly shot. He could handle either a pistol or rifle with equal dexterity.

One day Rocky Bear's tribe raided an

Arapahoe war party. White Beaver was in the thick of the battle. He killed several Arapahoes. Then an Arapahoe warrior, charging in with his lance, cut a deep gash in White Beaver's thigh. White Beaver killed him with a well-placed rifle bullet.

When the fight was over, Rocky Bear found White Beaver laying on the ground. For weeks he lay sick, but he finally recovered.

Finally he left Rocky Bear's tribe. For his was a wild nature that demanded new lands and new peoples. In 1868 he and nine other white men were ambushed by the Shoshones at Whiskey Gap on the Sweetwater river.

THEY SOUGHT protection in a buffalo wallow. Frontiersmen, they were all good shots, and the redskins paid dearly. Already the horses were dead on the ground surrounding the wallow.

"Must be all of a hundred of the hellions," said Ted Walcott.

"They're sneakin' through the grass," said White Beaver. "They've robbed a wagon train an' they have rifles an' pistols. There goes one, Ted!"

Walcott shot. "Got 'im."

But the white men had to save their ammunition. They had to kill an Indian with every shot or they would lose their hair. The Indians finally withdrew into the surrounding hills.

Walcott frowned. "What's their play, White Beaver?"

"They know we have no water. The river is a mile away. If we try to get water there, we'll be out in the open."

"What we goin' do?"

"Fight it out."

Next morning the Indians sat out of rifle range and watched them. For three days the white men suffered the tortures of thirst. They had plenty of grub but no water. The stench from the dead horses was nauseating.

White Beaver said, "We've got to make a break for it, men." He ran forward, his rifle speaking. But he made each shot count. By that time the whites had reached the Sweetwater and had thrown up a barricade of logs and driftwood. They had plenty of water now and were itching to fight.

But the Shoshones had enough. They retreated with the death-chants for their dead echoing across the valley. But the recklessness and the daring of Frank Powell, better known as White Beaver, became known to all.

The Blackfeet ambushed him and three rangers on the Stinking Water. The white men had no shelter to get behind. So, lead by White Beaver, they charged the Indians. The redskins broke under the impetus of the charge and retreated. But they left some dead behind. White Beaver mopped his sweaty forehead. "That was close," he said.

"They'll get you yet," said a ranger.

White Beaver smiled.

In 1877 a company of soldiers left Camp Stambaugh under the command of Captain Meinhold. White Beaver was their scout. They crossed the trail of the marauding Cheyennes. They came across burned cabins. Fences were broken down. Fields had been scorched by fire. Then they came across the emigrant train.

Here was a smoldering campfire. Here, too, were burning wagons. Dead horses, still harnessed, lay on the ground. There was horror and destruction here. And then there were the dead people.

They lay there, mutilated and torn. It was a sickening sight. Fifteen pioneers. And one was a woman. Killing men was bad enough but to kill a woman was breaking the strongest unwritten law of the frontier.

They buried the dead people. Then they rode on, grim and silent and deadly. The Cheyennes, according to White Beaver, were not far ahead. It took them two days to catch the marauders.

The battle was fierce and brief. And, when most of the Indians had been killed, Meinhold looked about for White Beaver. They found White Beaver laying among the dead Indians. But he was not dead. For months he lay at death's door. And finally he recovered.

"I'm done Indian fighting," he said.

"Why, White Beaver?"

"Ain't as young as I used to be."

So the great scout went back to Wisconsin. There, at Black River Falls, he set up his medical practice. He had played his part in winning the west.

When Satan Wore A Badge

By BUCK RINGOE

Hank Plummer, deadliest of the old-time desperadoes, got himself "elected" sheriff. Then hell really began to pop in the blazing gold-camps!

THREE MEN, hale, hearty and jubilant with success—golden success—their faces half hidden under ill-kempt beards, their weather-tanned cheeks flushed with the ruddy glow of a campfire on a slope beside the Beaverhead River, smoked thoughtfully and listened to the rush of the torrent below them.

It had been better if their ears had been sharper, their senses more alert—or that the Beaverhead did not rush down from the Salmon River Mountains with such rumble and chatter.

"It's our last night at Bannock," mused the youngest of the three, a lean-jawed, wide-shouldered fellow whose corn-colored locks fell low on his leather-brown neck. "Think of it, pardners—our last night in this place."

The others nodded and puffed their pipes. Far away, higher up on a slope in the distance they could see the flickering light of another campfire. Other gold miners. Why, they were all over the place. All up and down the Beaverhead this spring of 1863—tearing the precious yellow metal from the bosom of the earth, washing it from the tumbling streams, kicking nuggets from the surface with their clumsy toes.

The scum of the western plains, the riff-raff from the shores of the Mississippi; from far to the south and the gulf coast came the swarthy-hued Mexicans, and all together, like scurrying animals they swept from hole to hole, north, south, east. From Lewiston to Elk River, thence to Elk City and Florence. Eastward, the cry went up, and over the mountains to the Beaverhead.

Here sprang up Bannock, nearest to hell that ever disgraced our great western frontier, a hotbed of the devil. Dodge City in its reddest days never could hold a candle to this melting pot of mad men who fought the clock around with pistols, knives, axes and clubs.

Killers' carnival, it truly was with the seething, ever moving population dominated by odds of four-to-one in favor of the outlaw legion. Every day men died in one of these wild towns, many of the deaths never coming to light. For over this wilderness of wealth, over an area nearly as large as that which is now the entire state of Idaho, ruled a creature with the body of a man, the brain of a snake and the heart of a wolf.

This man was Henry Plummer. And in a thicket on the slope above the campfire on the Beaverhead, Hank Plummer and six of his chosen murderers now crouched, glittering eyes fixed on the three by the fire. Young "Kansas" Jones, with the yellow hair, was facing the place where the outlaw chief and his gang were hidden. Plummer's finger fondled the hair-spring.

"No shootin' here," Plummer cautioned. "There's another camp not far up there. If anybody hears us it would be embarrassin'." He chuckled softly. Hank Plummer enjoyed what he thought was a sense of humor.

Beside him, like leashed wolves, huddled George Ives, Boone Helm and four other conscienceless killers. Helm's teeth bared and he licked his lips.

"We savvy, chief," whispered Helm. "We'll put the steel to 'em quick an' neat." His hand felt of the knife-handle protruding from his waistband.

At a word from Plummer, who lingered behind a little, the six moved forward, cautiously, creeping, their bellies close to the ground, silent as cats.

Just as Indians had crept up on white settlers, Plummer's killers appeared suddenly in the firelight, and a single voice spoke. Plummer was playing it safe.

"Stop bellyachin'," commanded the Vigilante leader. "Hold yore head still, damn yuh."

"Don't a one o' yuh make a sound, yuh hear?" he snapped. "We gotcha covered an' we'll blow yore brains all over the fire. Don't move!"

Jones and his fireside comrades froze. They were caught without weapons or any sort of fighting chance. And in that twinkling instant of pause the six beasts had flung themselves. Axe and knife. The flashing glint of steel upraised and driven home, the groans of helpless men, beheaded, windpipes severed. No gun thundered an alarm to nearby miners' shacks, no rifle-fire echoed the miles down river to where Bannock, the town itself, bathed in the light of a hundred lamps and the flash of a thousand riotous six shooters.

This was Kansas Jones' last night at Bannock. But it was only one of many for Hank Plummer and his gang. Digging out the sacks of hidden dust, they crept away to their horses.

Plummer, gambler and gunman, most ruthless desperado of the early west, was spreading the tentacles of his robber horde across the Rockies.

PLUMMER, so the records state, was born in the state of Connecticut in 1836 or '37. He was for many years believed to have been an Englishman, but this has been proved untrue.

As a young man he followed the trail to the California gold fields. Plummer was no coward, but he was lazy, and shrewd. He soon learned that the gambler had the edge on the gold-crazy miners; it was easier to perfect a clever pair of hands for the manipulation of cards and the timely yanking of a trigger.

Thus Hank Plummer, whom some say was first a baker on the Gold Coast, deserted the dough and floury hands for a crooked deck and a straight-shooting six-gun. The enthusiasm with which he celebrated his first successes as a short-card sharp and gun-toter caused Plummer to dig a fast trail out of California with a committee of shouting, shooting citizens behind him.

A taunting laugh echoed from the fleeing killer's lips as he swung about in his saddle and scattered a few warning shots at his pursuers.

"Stick to yore ox-teams, yuh grubbers," he shouted. "Yuh don't know the fastest hoss in Californy when yuh see him."

After roaming the country over a bit, Hank Plummer finally landed in Lewiston. This town was then the thriving center of a newly discovered placer mining region. Plummer hit it at the peak of its prosperity.

"This is somethin' like it," he chuckled as he learned of the thousands in dust and nuggets that sifted almost daily through the mountain trails, via Lewiston. "Now fer a little gun oil and a few decks of trained cards."

Lewiston took to Plummer like a den of rattlesnakes to a newcomer of its own breed. For a few days everything was "hunky-dory," then some of the bolder citizens spread the rumor that Mister Plummer's card-dealing was not all that it should be and Hank found himself with his guns in his hands.

When the smoke cleared one of the Lewiston gents was deader than a hitching post, a few would live but carry scars, and the gambler-gunman had disappeared. Plummer, except for one time in his life, seemed always able to recognize the psychological moment and seize it. So, escaping scot-free from Lewiston, he struck the gold camp called Oro Fino, some miles to the eastward, near the Bitter Root Mountains.

Here, in Oro Fino, the killer joined forces with the first of the renegades with which he was soon afterward to surround himself. Jack Cleveland was already a murderer in his own right; a tough-skinned, hard-boiled highwayman, or road agent, as the bandits were known in those early frontier days.

Plummer and Cleveland shined to each other at once. And almost at once, they quarreled over one of the honky-tonk girls. The affair promised a duel to the death, but Plummer, cold, shrewd plotter that he was, saw the folly of this.

"Forget it, Jack," he suggested cagily while all of Oro Fino stood by, eagerly expectant. "The woman ain't worth it. Are we men enough to settle this sensible, or are we fools enough to drag our guns an' kill each other, so some other gent can take the gal an' the whole town laugh over our graves?"

This was simple logic. Cleveland saw it at once and with mutual agreement the

pair turned backs on the girl and Oro Fino, heading for new diggings reported southward at Elk City and Florence.

Had Hank Plummer known it then, he would have felt a great relief at the knowledge, for this sudden change of stamping ground on his part and the subsequent rush of the miners in the same direction broke up a fairly concerted movement of a growing Vigilante Committee. This hangover from the California days was only then beginning to take root in Idaho Territory. Robbery and murder were becoming too common. Even then Mister Plummer and his associate Mister Cleveland were being suspected.

THUS did Plummer escape a second time that history records. With each escape his vanity swelled. His skill with a six-shooter and his art with the marked deck lifted him, wherever he went, to a pedestal.

And it was his vanity which was hurt most when the man, after moving from camp to camp, eventually crossed the Salmon River range and arrived in buzzing Bannock on the Beaverhead River.

"These jugheads don't know who I am," declared Plummer, awe-struck as he turned to his pardner, Cleveland, halting before one of the fifty glittering Bannock drink emporiums.

Cleveland nodded narrowly and stared about him at the throngs of boisterous, roistering miners, bullwhackers, merchants and swaggering toughs who filled the bleak, muddy street. Here was a metropolis. Must be ten thousand of the crazy gold seekers here.

"Come on, Jack," suggested Plummer, hauling his companion into the saloon. "We'll oil up and afterwards we'll hunt some kind of a shack. I'll show these damn mud-puddlers who I am."

At that very moment Plummer had planned his first murder in Bannock. But first there was business. Leaning against the slop-stained bar the future sheriff of a territory as large as the combined present states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire, planned to show Mr. Cleveland how to collect a few bags of gold, and on the morrow Hank Plummer would make himself known to Bannock.

"Drink it down," toasted Plummer.

"Mud in yer eyes," responded Cleveland, unsuspecting.

Mean, calculating killer that he was, Plummer waited all the following day before putting his scheme to work. During the night he and Cleveland had managed to locate a few miserable miners whose gold was easy to get. A muffled shot from the shadows, the quick drive of a keen knife-blade, and the robbers made themselves scarce in the neighborhood with speed.

Gold in their pockets, whiskey bottles emptied and sleep was snug enough in their flimsy shack, from which they had driven their previous, timid tenant. Through the glare of the mid-day sun Plummer and Cleveland snored. Plummer wanted the whole town to see the speed of his draw and the bull's-eye he scored when he shot.

So in the cool of early evening, with Bannock coming to life, the saloons popping like fire-crackers under a can, Hank Plummer completed a neat toilet and led the unsuspecting Cleveland down the straggling, half-mile wide street and into the dive that the gold seekers had playfully nick-named the "Bucket of Blood."

"I'm buyin' the first one," announced Plummer, observing with keen satisfaction the size of the audience he would entertain.

Bottles came up on the bar and the two took their place, along with shouting, cursing, singing ruffians who fought for the privilege of emptying their dust on the foul-smelling bar.

Plummer's eyes sparkled as the booze went down. It was rotten whiskey, but there was none better, and a man had to drink.

"This is on me," declared Jack Cleveland, motioning for the second one. And together they drained glasses.

Then Plummer leaned close to Cleveland and said something. No man there heard what was said, but all swung quickly out of range, as Cleveland spun about and hurled a curse in Plummer's teeth. The challenge rang out and Plummer, his hand fastened on the butt of his six-shooter, flung back his own filthy curse into Cleveland's teeth. It was like a lighted match in a powder magazine.

"You dirty son—" Jack Cleveland grabbed for his gun. But Plummer drew with the suck of a breath and shot his companion dead center through the heart.

"Tried to get me, eh?" laughed the ice-cold Plummer as he rammed the smoking pistol into its holster. His cat eyes took in the crowd of awe-struck patrons, hard men every one. They stood rooted to the floor. "When a gent comes gunnin' for Hank Plummer he's as good as dead an' buried."

Every man within range had seen Cleveland go for his gun, but no one of them had seen Plummer's hand waiting for Plummer had arranged it so. He had stood with his holstered weapon against the bar, really under its overhanging shadow. Yes, Cleveland had been the aggressor. And what a streak of lightning this Plummer gent was.

"He'll be a nice gent to steer clear of," remarked one of the better element, edging toward the door with a companion. "Did you see that feller shoot?"

"Yeah," replied the other as he stepped aside to let a visitor pass. A score of heads turned at the entrance of the newcomer. In fact everybody noticed the caller except Hank Plummer, who was using his boot toe to shove the body of Jack Cleveland away from where he desired to stand and buy another drink.

The first that Plummer knew of the last man to enter the Bucket of Blood was when the miners' sheriff, Jack Crawford, stuck a big six-gun against Plummer's kidneys and put the come-along grip on Hank's collar.

"I want you, mister," announced Sheriff Crawford, who had a knack of looking just the way he spoke. "Come with me now."

Plummer hesitated. A half-dozen witnesses, bleary-eyed, whiskery habitués of the dive, informed the officer that everything was all right. Crawford's thumb slowly eared the gun hammer forward and Hank marched out of the saloon, free.

A huge crowd followed, collected more outside and proceeded up the street toward the building used for a court house and jail. A miners' court promptly was called, and in less than it takes to record, Plummer was voted an official welcome to Bannock, a verdict of "Not Guilty" by a score of twenty-two to two, and turned loose to lead a wild charge toward the Bucket of Blood where he set up the drinks for a hundred derelicts.

Corks popped. Guns thundered. Glass shattered. Splinters flew. Lamps were refilled and more bottles emptied. Plummer, in response to the splendid reception given him by the men of Bannock, announced his intention to hunt up Sheriff Jack Crawford and shoot him on sight.

That night at least a dozen of the more reckless drifters in the camp pledged themselves to Plummer's support, with their guns in their hands.

With this security Hank Plummer plunged out of the dive and went on a search for the sheriff.

DISGUSTED with the lack of support he had received Crawford had climbed his saddle and ridden north along the Beaverhead on a tour of duty. There were diggings along there for miles. It was a couple of days before Plummer and Crawford met.

The sheriff was, of course, warned of Hank Plummer's threat and so was not surprised by the gambler. Instead of walking into the town unsuspecting, he arrived at a time when Plummer was off his guard. The two met in front of the restaurant from which the sheriff had just emerged.

The meeting affected Bannock's street like a bolt of lightning. Men jumped and ran helter skelter. Horsemen spurred for safety.

Hank Plummer, filled with conceit and quickly counting the lawman's scalp for his own, laughed boldly and reached for his pistol.

"Now I've gotcha, yuh yeller-bellied scum," jeered Plummer.

Crawford, trailing a shotgun which was part of his armament and a most useful persuader in frontier arguments, flipped this scrap-iron spreader belt high and fired. The thunder of the shotgun merged with a scream of pain as the charge almost tore Plummer's right forearm off, knocking him off balance, and flinging his six shooter a dozen feet away.

"You cheap tin horn," snapped Sheriff Crawford. "I'll learn you to keep the peace around here." Then, seeing the suggested threat of several weapons covering

him from various vantage points as the followers of Plummer closed up, Crawford turned on his heel and walked away. Why the gang did not murder him then, has ever been a mystery.

The crowd instead assisted Plummer to his cabin, and a doctor named Glick was dragged in bodily, by force of arms and the threat of death. Glick, with a pistol held against his ribs, removed the slugs from the renegade leader's arm, but his skill was not enough to save the member as a useful portion of the killer's anatomy.

"Tendons are ruined, Plummer," said the surgeon. "I've done my best. You can keep your arm, but I'm afraid it will not be of much use for—pistol shooting."

Plummer, furious at Crawford, at himself now, and at the doctor for his inability to perform miracles, swore to kill Glick on sight if he mentioned a word in Bannock about the mob of guerrillas who had brought him there, or their association with Hank Plummer.

Whether it was his professional oath or his fear of death, Doctor Glick carried his secret of the Plummer Gang for months, and only after the banding of the Vigilantes did he disclose the facts.

For weeks his shattered arm and the fever kept Plummer close to his bed. From this wretched headquarters the wounded outlaw took up the direction of the growing gang's operations. Miners and merchants packing out their treasures continued to die.

Every trail was blocked. Pack trains were held up and whole parties butchered for the gold they carried, for their equipment, even their provisions. The stage lines rumbling over the trail to Lewiston and Florence were halted regularly. No miner ever escaped, no strong box was secure enough, no guard sufficient. Plummer was operating on a system, using selected spies who kept track of shipments of gold, of proposed departures of miners' groups.

And, when his arm had healed enough to permit him to leave his cabin, Hank Plummer went in search of Crawford once more. But alas! The sheriff for some strange reason, had pulled stakes and left the diggings. Was it fear of Plummer or realization of his inability to cope with the outlaw elements single handed? The answer has never been learned. The fact, however, was enough. Crawford was gone.

When Plummer was certain of this, he called a meeting of his bandits.

"I'll take the job as sheriff o' these here diggin's," he declared boldly. "What Bannock needs is law an' order."

A rousing cheer swelled at this announcement and the crowd nodded in enthusiastic approval. Hank Plummer for sheriff! And why not? Who was there to oppose him?

THE WILD OUTLAW ELEMENT of the camp elected him to the office of sheriff by popular acclaim. And they did it pronto. Plummer, his right arm useless for gunfighting, began immediately to practice with his left, becoming expert. While he was doing this he called into consultation a few of his best (or worst) gang members.

"As sheriff o' this here territory," announced Hank. "I find myself needin' some deputies an' some kinda organization —" (a hearty chuckle from the sheriff and a rumble of smothered applause from the gang) "—Bill Bunton, I'm appointin' you first deputy sheriff. Raise yore right hand . . ."

Bill Bunton, tugged at his mustache ends and rose, a grin on his ugly face.

"There's too much gold bein' smuggled outa this territory," warned the sheriff with mock seriousness. "You know gold when yuh sees it, Bill, an' yuh know how to shoot yore gun."

"I certain do," agreed Bill, and sat down.

Plummer then proceeded to appoint others in the organized network of thieving killers who robbed right and left and murdered in cold blood at a mere nod from the leader.

Men were assigned to watch the stage stations, others to fixed posts on the numerous trails between camps, still others to keep an eye on the proposed changes of habitation among the tradesmen and the floating population. This included miners rich with dust who, knowing the danger to their lives attempted to pull stakes in secret and escape over the mountains.

"Every gent in this law an' order league," Plummer here showed the keen, calculating mind he possessed, "will wear

the same kinda clothes, far as possible, same kinda hats, and—he'll trim his mustache 'r beard the same. Everybody'll look alike an' no squawker kin identify us. Savvy?"

"Hurray!" roared the gang. "Three cheers for Sheriff Plummer!"

HOT on the heels of "Sheriff" Plummer's pronouncement, came the sensational news of a great strike at Alder Gulch. Here was discovered the richest placer mining region in all of the west. With the flood of frantic gold seekers which hastened over the mountains to this later famous spot, a new camp sprang up on the flats along the creek. A few of the gentlemen whose memories still treasured their southern birthright named this place Virginia City.

Plummer promptly called in some of his most trusted and dependable killers, among them Ned Ray, Buck Stinson, Charley Forbes, Hayes Lyons, Bill Shears, Steve Marshland and George Lowry.

"Get yore hosses," ordered Plummer with his customary courtesy, "an' drop over to this Virginia City camp as fast as yuh can. If we're goin' to establish complete cooperation between the two biggest gold diggin's in the territory we better start now."

His listeners agreed, nodding, and waited.

"Pick out one o' them clod-hoppers an' make an example of him. Yuh savvy? Charley," he looked at Forbes, "you can do some recruitin' there an' make plans fer holdin' regular court. We can git rid o' the gent who thinks he's sheriff over there. Easy."

The delegates to this savory task nodded again, loaded up their weapons, sharpened their knives, and rode out of Bannock for Virginia City.

History bares the crimson facts concerned with this move of Sheriff Plummer. Briefly they are these. Stinson, Ray and the others reached the thriving camp in Alder Gulch, lost no time in murdering a gent named Joe Dillingham, and quickly spread the outlaw legion's warning to the sheriff of Virginia City.

"Git!" they told him, "or git killed."

It was practically the same ultimatum laid down by the fearless sheriff of Cochise County, Arizona, some years later. John Slaughter was his name, and he passed his word to the outlaws.

The Virginia City law enforcer took the gang at its word and "got." Nor did he tarry. On his going Charley Forbes sent word by mounted messenger back to Plummer, who came at once, in all of his finery and ferocity. Hank Plummer, of Bannock, had himself appointed immediately as sheriff of Virginia City. Now he had the situation thoroughly in hand.

His first act was to issue an order for his deputies to gather in the murderer of Dillingham. This was a simple task, and within an hour Ray and Stinson brought in Hayes Lyons, one of the youngest of the gang and a reckless hellion who would kill at the crook of Plummer's little finger.

Charley Forbes, self-appointed clerk of the newly organized court, opened that tribunal in a clearing near the camp's toughest honky-tonk. Sheriff Plummer presided, and, amid the cheers of the booze-sotted majority, Lyons was tried and found "Not Guilty."

A tall, red-headed giant, lurking back in the shadows beyond reach of the bonfire flames, watched the proceedings with set jaw, his light blue eyes as cold as nail heads. A shorter companion stood at either side of this red-headed fellow, and the giant bent a little as the verdict was proclaimed.

"This gang is dealin' 'em out to us from the bottom of the deck," he mumbled. "I don't savvy that Plummer nor the company he keeps. Come on, we'll go have a little talk."

Now as it happens, the names of the fearless white men who eventually took the law into their own hands and sought to clean up the gold camps of Virginia City and Bannock, were treasured in darkest secrecy for more reasons than one. First, however, was the knowledge that it was difficult in those bloody times to trust your neighbor. The outlaws worked under cover. Why not the lawbringers?

Thus spread the word. The Vigilantes were forming. The signal was passed among the known better element, among those members of the two communities who were recognized as having something to protect, something to steal from and murder them for. They were the business

men of Virginia City, owners of bull teams who freighted across the towering mountains from the railheads, lucky miners who had pooled their resources and scraped thousands in raw gold from the claims.

These were the types of men banding together for mutual protection. Then, one night, under cover of the clouded sky, while the big sheriff of all he surveyed was at his home in Bannock, the night riders saddled up.

TWO new murders had been committed in the Gulch, and the killers were known. Bragging openly of their crimes, secure in the ruthless power of the robber gang, they did not dream of the little body of men who were arming themselves with gun and rope.

Whiskey Bill Graves and Mexican Frank, as low a pair of cutthroats as ever stumbled from a dive in Alder Gulch, were hitting the high spots of Virginia City's main thoroughfares, celebrating the most recent of their killings and spending the plunder when, from an alley between two false-fronted "joints," the silent loop of a half-inch rope shot out and snugged around their middles.

Came a swift jerk, and the quick hauling of several strong hands. Before either of the outlaws had recovered breath enough to shout an alarm or sputter a curse, the tall red-headed giant clubbed each one on the chin with his huge rock-hard fist, insuring temporary silence.

"Now," said this sorrel-topped Vigilante. "Just tie these skunks aboard an' we'll take 'em for a pasear up the trail."

So, gagged and bound, lashed head and feet down over a bare-backed horse, Whiskey Bill and Mexican Frank were treated to their last ride. The Citizens' Committee worked swiftly.

A mile up the gulch they had selected a tree. Under this they halted. It was an ideal spot. The dead calm of the mountain night cast a sort of weird spell over the scene. One of Red's party, a wiry fellow of perhaps fifty, with a long drooping black mustache, jerked the ropes from the murderers and stood them on their feet. Both were fully conscious now, and quite sobered.

"What's comin' off here?" demanded Whiskey Bill Graves. "An' who the hell are you gents?" He peered closer, into the faces of his captors. None of them was masked and Graves started for he knew them each one. The wiry gent who held the rope remained silent while Graves stared.

"It's you, Jimmy!" Whiskey Bill cried. "Yuh—swingin'—ME?"

"Yeh, Bill," replied the one called Jimmy. "I'm sorry as hell, but yuh ain't worth livin'. Yuh better die before yuh got many more killin's on yore conscience. Hold yore head still, damn yuh."

With the rope neat around his neck, the well-known hangman's knot close under his ear, Whiskey Bill was boosted aboard the bare back of the horse. Another figure hurled the rope over the limb above, snugged it with a quick hitch. The red-haired fellow held the bridle of the horse.

With a scream Mexican Frank made a desperate lunge and started running for a turn in the clearing.

"Crack!" A pistol barked viciously and the killer from below the Rio Grande stumbled, executed a little jack rabbit buck, and hit the ground on the top of his head. The bullet had nailed him center shot where men in other walks of life wear a collar button.

One of the dark figures motioned silently, and the man called Jimmy, brought down his open palm on Whiskey Bill's mount. The animal leaped, to let Graves drop with a queer little gurgling snap.

When Whiskey Bill had ceased to jerk, they placed the other rope about the Mexican's crimson neck and hung him there beside his partner in death for the benefit of all who might see and carry the word.

HANK PLUMMER saw the writing on the wall. This Vigilante movement had started again. He remembered it from Lewiston, and from Oro Fino. This time, however, he pulled out a trick from his sleeve. Rounding up some of the more timid citizens of Bannock, he threatened them with sudden and bloody death unless they joined the Vigilantes and prepared the way for him to become a member of the secret clan.

"I'll beat them at their own game," Plummer bragged to his hoodlums. "This pickin' is too soft to give up without a struggle."

But he was wrong. Already there was word passing from lip to lip. The self-appointed braggart who wore the sheriff's star was the leader of the robber bunch. Swift word was carried to him also, by his cohorts of the Vigilantes, the timid gents who feared Plummer as they feared the grave.

"They are watching yuh an' every move yuh make," they told Hank one night under cover of the dark.

"Oh, they are, huh?" growled the murder king. "An' who the hell are these gents, anyways? What's their names?"

The names of a dozen of the Citizens' Committee were spoken, divulged under threat of mutilation, of horrible torture, and the Plummer Gang went silently to work that very night.

Knives with razor edges and needle points were gripped in eager, savage claws. The outlaws stole through the dark to the cabins and shacks of the known Vigilantes.

Not one of them was given a chance to cry out, to make a move. He was killed while he slept, murdered by the ghouls who laughed at the death struggles and left their victims to cool in pools of their own blood.

Alder Gulch became a hell, but the news of this retaliation by the outlaws wormed its way into the courage of the better element and in spite of flaming guns and dripping knives the Vigilantes grew. New members were added, both in Virginia City and Bannock. The spirit of law and order flamed high. It spread to the newest miners' camp far up the creek—Nevada City.

From this last-named diggings a pack train started out one day, in broad daylight, led by a grizzled, iron-jawed man called "Oregon" Hallock. Five men, including Hallock, plodded beside their mules, and it is said that in those packs the Hallock party was toting out to the coast almost one hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold.

High in the Bitter Root Mountains the pack train was ambushed. A slug from a fifty caliber rifle cut through Oregon Hallock's beard and the crack of the gun itself crashed with splintering echoes against the pass. Hallock gasped, cursed and shouted an order to his companions. In a flash they had tumbled their animals to the ground, snatched rifle and six-shooter and proceeded to return the scattering fire that now surrounded them.

"Lay low," cautioned Oregon Hallock. "Make 'em come out in the open. Look! There!" His rifle spoke and he saw a figure jerk, stumble and disappear. "Hit him, anyway," chuckled Hallock grimly. "Stand 'em off now, boys."

The fight in the pass was a bitter one, with outlaws calling now and then for the miners to surrender.

"Nobody'll get hurt," was the shout of a voice which Hallock swore at once was that of George Ives. "Leave the packs on the mules an' hit the trail," came the order. "We don't wanta kill nobody."

"To hell with you!" Hallock yelled back as spokesman for his party.

Ives rallied his pardners. These damn grubbers would get away with a fortune unless they could stop them.

"Rush 'em!" yelled Steve Marshland, one of the gang. "We can charge 'em from all sides an' stamp 'em into the mud."

It was what the Hallock party waited for. With a shout George Ives rose from behind a boulder and started forward. Streams of fire spouted from his rifle. Other figures popped up now and began surrounding the gold-laden party.

"B-ram-mmm!" One of the miners' guns cracked out and Ives' rifle dropped; his mask was torn away by another slug and Hallock yelled across the distance, "You'll swing for this, George Ives."

VOLLEYS poured from the entrenched miners' weapons, wounding more than a few of the outlaws, and during the battle Ives and Steve Marshland were positively identified. Later, after the gold party had succeeded in driving off the outlaws and had got over the mountains to reach Lewiston, they told their story. Riders carried the word back along the trail.

This was one shipment of gold that ran the Plummer gauntlet. And it was actually responsible for the beginning of real work by the Vigilantes. The citizens from the various camps opened communications and maintained them, even as the Plummer Gang did. The net began to close in on the outlaws. The Vigilantes were compiling a list; George Ives topped it and there were half a dozen with him.

Then with rapid succession the gang staged two of its bloodiest murders and the tempers of the better men flared white-hot.

ONE of Virginia City's most prominent and prosperous citizens, a storekeeper by the name of Lloyd Magruder, decided that his fortune of some fifty thousand dollars accumulated from his general merchandise business was enough for one man. He would retire and go back home to the East. But to get there the shortest route was the longest. He must go to the Pacific Coast. With four guards whom he hired for the purpose of insuring safety the five men left Virginia City, homeward bound.

Passing through Bannock, as he must, Magruder and his party were joined by a party of Bannock miners. They, too, were going out. The double party headed for the mountains.

"I don't like the looks o' these fellers," cautioned one of Magruder's paid guards to his employer as they started. "I've seen them talkin' with Hank Plummer or I'm a knock-kneed rattlesnake."

Magruder shrugged. He was a cheerful man, good natured. These fellows looked a harmless lot.

"We're as many as them," said the Virginia merchant. "Yo're a bit jumpy. Come along."

Only a couple of days from Bannock, they halted at dark to camp. One of Magruder's guards was posted. They relieved each other, army fashion.

In the dead of the night the Plummer hellions crawled from their blankets. A gleaming blade cut down the guard on post. The fellow never knew who slashed his life away. And with his lifeless body spread out on the hillside, silently the ghouls fell on Magruder and the other three—with axes—chopped their heads off.

With the booty of more than fifty thousand in gold they came rollicking back to Bannock just as word came flaming on high of the brutal murder of a German miner named Adolph Tiebalt.

Two men of Nevada City, on a hunting trip in the hills to provide meat for their larders, stumbled over the rotting corpse of Tiebalt, and a fierce urge to avenge this cruel murder fired their very brains.

"Why wait?" argued the first, a grim-jawed hard-rock man from Colorado. "Let's go. We'll round up some o' the boys an' begin on the list. The time has come!"

Colorado's companion stood rooted, staring at the piteous corpse. Both men could see what had happened here as plainly as if they had been eyewitnesses to the crime. Tiebalt had been shot, then dragged by a rope about his neck, to this thicket. Even now in his clawing fingers were clumps of dirt and grass jerked out by the roots as he was dragged off to die beside the trail.

So, from Nevada City rode a score of silent, purposeful Vigilantes. They knew where they were going. Straight to the shack where George Ives and his friends made their hangout.

"Careful," warned one of the mounted men as they drew near the place. "Somebody is out front."

The man saw them, too, his eyes went wide with sudden terror. Nor did he delay to shout a warning to his pardners. Steve Marshland raced like a madman for his horse, vaulted into the saddle and broke like an Indian for the brush. The others, though, were completely surprised.

"Hands up, high!" bellowed the first Vigilante, when they had dismounted and surrounded the shack. At the door the leader leveled two six-shooters. "Come on, Ives—all of you."

Seven outlaws marched out glumly, their furtive eyes seeking a chance of escape.

"Go ahead, George," a Vigilante encouraged the vicious beast whose name was Ives. "Go ahead. Make a break for it." He fingered the hammer of his rifle as if begging the outlaw to run, but Ives' body trembled so that he could hardly stand.

As the robber bunch filed out and were lashed to saddles, one citizen checked their names off his list. Then, carefully guarded, the prisoners were led away toward Nevada City. Ives noted the direction.

"Take us to Virginia City," he demanded, echoed by his comrades. "We want a jury trial. The sheriff is goin' to hear about this."

The man from Colorado, who was, of course, one of the party, laughed outright. "He certainly will. Mebbe too soon."

What the hell did he mean by this?

wondered Ives. He was not long in finding out.

Entering Nevada City with their well-known gunmen bound hand and foot, the parade caused a strange hush to grip the rough camp. The riff-raff flooded to the doors of the dives. Storefronts were filled with staring citizens. Drunken miners staggered from the path, to frown quizzically up into the sullen faces of the outlaws.

Nevada, be it known, was strongest of all the camps in favor of the right, for law and order. The power of the Vigilantes here was already being felt. That evening the news was spread and by morning thousands of miners had dropped their picks and pans to come marching into the camp. The murderers were to be tried instantly.

Then, up from Virginia City marched another army of hard faced men.

"Here they come!" shouted Nevada's lookouts. "Twelve good men an' true. Build a loop for Ives!"

They made short work of it, too. The miners' court was formed. Twelve men from Nevada; twelve from Virginia. Hear ye! Long John, a rascal among the hellions, was allowed to turn state's evidence. His testimony fixed the guilt on George Ives. With graphic awkward phrase he pictured for the vast assembly of earnest men the cruel murder of Tiebalt, the attack on Hallock's pack train.

The others among the prisoners, as guilty as hell itself of perhaps numberless crimes thereabouts, were led to the edge of camp and warned: Never come back! Return—and you die!

George Ives they hung. A scaffold was swiftly erected and the doomed outlaw dragged to the trap. Like many of the cruelest killers of the west, Ives showed yellow when the rope went round his neck. Curses were flung on the upturned faces before him. Then, the trap was sprung and one of Hank Plummer's ablest confederates was dropped to death.

WHEN Plummer heard of Ives' fate, he laughed coarsely. Even then with the law and order clan strengthening, he was defiant. They would never pin these crimes on him. Besides, there was much picking still to be enjoyed before he'd ever relinquish his hold on Bannock or Virginia City.

"To hell with them all!" he roared. "When they think they can take Hank Plummer, sheriff of Bannock and Virginia City, let them come a-shootin'. I'll feed them more lead than they got brains."

The gang cheered, as usual, but that night, under cover of dark, more than a few of Plummer's cut-throat clan hit the breeze for parts unknown. The territory was getting too hot for them. Rumors were flying too thick, too fast.

The Vigilantes, encouraged by increasing support and confidence from the better men in all the camps, were awake while other men slept.

Spies brought word of outlaw moves. Names were whispered, drunkenly boasted. And half a hundred horsemen rode through the darkness to put the hand of retribution on Buck Stinson, Ned Ray, Red Yager and George Brown.

In the light of a rising moon the Night Riders halted on the trail. It was signficant that they had stopped beneath a towering cottonwood.

One at a time they drew confessions from the quartet. Red Yager, a freckled, pale-eyed homicidal maniac, proved the real treasure of the campaign. Trembling in fear, he broke down and pointed the accusing finger at every last important member of the outlaw legion, including Hank Plummer himself. Plummer was the leader.

Yager was hung without further ceremony, the vague shadowy circle of mounted Vigilantes hemming him in. Red Yager died a blusterer. George Brown, paralyzed with fright, made no sound as his escort booted his horse from under him. Stinson and Ray, so the legend goes, cursed to high heaven and to hell, professing their innocence until they dropped.

While the camps still slept, the riders turned their mounts toward Bannock. Early the following morning they arrived, and a solemn, lynx-eyed squadron they were as they rode up to the house of Henry Plummer, threw open the door and rammed the muzzle of a six-shooter against the gang leader's heart. Plummer was unarmed; he was not even within reach of a weapon.

"You draw the lucky number, Hank,"

announced one of the foremost Vigilantes. "Get yore hat an' coat an' come with us."

Hank Plummer's face was livid. His cold gray eyes bulged from their sockets, and his lips quivered.

"W—wh—what the—the hell d'yuh mean?" he cried, stark terror in his face.

"Business! Plummer, yore game's up. Move!"

Down the rutted street of Bannock marched the captors of Hank Plummer. The robber chieftain stumbled drunkenly. Crowds of miners gathered around the escort, staring at the once ruthless murderer, now cringing like a frightened child.

Under the scaffold he was halted. A rope fell swiftly about his throat and Plummer, the brutal, vicious master-mind of yesterday, threw himself to the ground, sobbing, crying out like the coward he really was.

"God have mercy on me," he shouted shrilly. "Men—don't do this terrible thing to me—my wife—my God!— Give me á chance to live it down!" His voice rose to a pitiful unearthly scream. "Cut off my ears!" he begged, from his knees, his hands clasped beseechingly as in prayer. "Cut out my tongue, boys. Cut off my fingers. Let me live. I'm afraid to die, boys!"

"Stop bellyachin'!" commanded the Vigilante leader. "Come on, men, boost him up."

"Wait—wait," shouted Plummer, tears streaming down his face. "Gimme a chance to pray, men. I must—"

But they lifted him up and placed him on the platform, ignoring his pleas. Had Plummer or his killers ever given an innocent, helpless victim a chance?

Seeing that his tearful entreaties were having no effect, Plummer calmed. His eyes roved about from face to face among the hundreds of men he knew there. Some of these, men whose friends had been murdered by this renegade, laughed derisively in his face and called him yellow.

"So long, Hank Plummer! To hell with you now!"

It was like a signal. The voice boomed from the crowd and one of the Vigilantes raised the outlaw chief in his arms, lifted him, and—down!

That was the deserving end of Henry

Plummer, outlaw. But the others were being rounded up. One of the largest hanging parties held under the auspices of the Vigilantes in this campaign was shortly after when a few picked dead-shots among the miners caught Boone Helm, Jack Gallagher, Clubfoot George Lane, Frank Parish and Hayes Lyons.

Helm, as many students of the early west already know, was one of the toughest ever whelped. He had not a single redeeming trait and was even a colder-blooded fiend than Plummer himself. Helm had shot, carved, gouged and kicked men to death from the Pacific to Gold Creek. Some claim that Helm had even eaten more than one of his pardners in the mountains during the fierce winter.

The scene of this five-day execution was the interior of a half-completed barn. The sides were almost finished, but the rafters were bare.

From these rafters were strung a row of five nooses. Below were placed packing cases, crates, anything upon which to stand the hangee. Helm, Gallagher, Lane, Parish and Lyons were ushered in and placed in position. Thousands of fascinated citizens were packed around the barn watching from every available vantage point.

"Gimme a drink o' whiskey," demanded the calm Helm, after he had admitted to a score or more wanton murders. "If there's anything I don't mind, it's hangin'."

The crowd stared silently at this strange creature who joked at his own funeral. But just then Lane, silent and repentant, leaped from his box of his own volition and hung himself.

"So long, George," called Helm, laughing. "See yuh in hell."

Lyons was one of those who broke and pleaded, tears in his eyes. "Gimme a chance, boys," he begged. "Let me go an' I'll get my woman an' leave the country—"

"You had yore chance," was the grim reply, and they kicked the box from under him.

Jack Gallagher, a bold, callous cowboy-miner, made jokes with his captors, called out to acquaintances in the crowd.

"How's this for a necktie?" he shouted as the rope was fastened around his neck. "Hey! Wait a minute, boys. Gimme a drink."

Somebody poured him a tumblerful of whiskey, and the account claims that Gallagher eased the rope about his neck in order to down the drink. When the officials jerked the box from under him and Gallagher started kicking, Helm laughed heartily. It was his turn next.

"So long, Boone," cried a gambler from the crowd.

Helm stared out over the audience. He showed absolutely no feeling, no interest in the fact that this was his last minute on earth.

"Three cheers for Jeff Davis!" he shouted. "Here I go!"

Springing from the box himself he went to his end.

Parish alone said nothing, gave no sign, but stood silently until his box was kicked away.

The work of the Vigilantes went on. Men long harassed by the worst and largest band of organized criminals the old west ever knew, continued picking up the murderers and scoundrels, running them down at night, hounding them along the trails, trapping them in the hills.

Among others who were caught and hung either as active members of the Plummer Gang or undesirables were Dutch John Wagner, Cyrus Skinner, Alex Carter, Johnny Cooper, George Shears, Bob Zachary, Bill Hunter, Bill Bunton, and Joseph A. Slade, who was a terror in his own right and had once held a responsible position in charge of the Overland Stage on the Mountain Division.

Steve Marshland, too, was caught and brought back to dangle as a warning to the rougher element of the territory.

Tom Kerr, one of Plummer's fast gunfighters, was among the few who fled at the first move of the Vigilantes. He high-tailed it southward to Tombstone, Arizona, where, as fate would have it, he met the same end as his companions in Montana. He lived by the gun and died by the rope. The outlaw bunch played a losing game.

So died the Plummer Gang.

GAMBLER'S LUCK

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Why was he making this ride? Mowry did not know.

It seemed Quiet John Mowry's usual luck, leaving a winning hand in a warm saloon to plunge through a howling blizzard toward certain death . . . what kind of luck lay ahead, if not the worst?

SNOW FLURRIES swept through Palisade City, heralding the coming of a blizzard, but the town—raw and rowdy boom town that it was—came alive as usual when darkness closed down. Burly freighters deserted wagons and teams, hoary prospectors wandered in from the hills, and red-shirted miners crept from

their shafts and tunnels. Men could liquor up in Palisade City; they could dance the fandango with honkytonk girls; or they could buck the card games dealt by the Faro Queen and Quiet John Mowry. Let the blizzard howl!

But a wagon and team lumbered through the wintry night, its driver seeking none of the town's questionable pleasures. The wagon was an Ohio farm flat-bed pulled by two heavy bay horses. The whole rig, down to the driver, seemed bewildered by the surroundings. The bays plodded with heads low against the gale, and the man tooled them along with slack reins. He was a big man in a huge sheepskin coat; his big black beard and high-bridged nose gave him the look of a patriarch. But his strength was gone and he kept himself upright only with difficulty.

The rig halted before the Silver Cup Saloon and the driver slumped sideways so that he almost pitched headlong to the ground. He recovered with an effort, and finally climbed down. He stood swaying in the wind like a drunken man, then moved unsteadily toward the lighted windows of the saloon. He stumbled and nearly collapsed, but made the door. His weight shoved the door open. He took two staggering steps, the warmth of the big room, laced with liquor fumes and tobacco smoke, hitting him like a blow. He stumbled again and finally fell, calling out . . .

QUIET JOHN MOWRY was dealing faro. He had just said, softly, "Bad night, outside," when the door opened and the big bearded stranger came lurching in. Mowry had a glimpse of the man's face, just as he sprawled to the floor, and despite the bushy beard Mowry knew that here was a man ravished by a great sickness.

But the crowd did not know. There was boisterous laughter and loud jeers for a man who seemed unable to carry a bellyful of rotgut whiskey. One of the red-skirted girls giggled and went to bend over the fallen stranger. Mowry lay aside his faro deck and quickly got to his feet.

"Don't touch that man," he said.

When Quiet John Mowry spoke, folks listened. The girl withdrew her outstretched hand as if from a coiled snake and the crowd's rowdy laughter broke and faded away. Over at the other faro table, Bonnie Mason, the Faro Queen, lifted her golden head and looked at Mowry with surprised eyes. Of all the people gathered in the Silver Cup, Bonnie knew Quiet John Mowry best. And never before had she heard excitement in his suave voice. "John," Bonnie said, "what is it?"

Mowry shook his head. He moved through the crowd and knelt. He turned the stranger over onto his back; with deft fingers, he lifted the eyelids and examined the man's eyes. They were yellow-tinted, jaundiced. The man's skin was discolored, livid in spots, and Mowry's sensitive fingers felt the high heat of a fever. Sam Keefer, the dudish owner of the saloon, came forward with a scowl on his florid face.

"What's the idea, John?" Keefer growled. "This hombre's only drunk. The boys will heave him out. Get back to your game."

"Wrong, Sam," Mowry said. "This man is sick. Dying, maybe."

He rose and looked around, hoping none of the crowd would suspect the truth—that the stranger was dying of smallpox. He said, "Somebody run and fetch Doc Caswell. And somebody bring a blanket. We'll carry this man into a back room. Nobody is to touch him—"

A burly freighter stepped forward and stared down at the sick man, a sudden shock showing on his face. "I know that hombre. His name is Judea Smith, and he's from that religious colony—the Tithemen—back at New Hope Valley. And there's pestilence in that there valley!"

Sam Keefer swore a round oath, thinking of what this would do to his business. One or two of the percentage girls cried out. Some of the men muttered, "Smallpox!" And the entire crowd shrank back. In sudden horror, Bonnie Mason exclaimed, "John, you touched him!"

Nervously, the crowd edged away from Quiet John Mowry.

QUIET JOHN MOWRY'S luck at faro was a miraculous thing. His luck as a private matter was a sorry thing. He lifted his hands, stared at them, wondering if they were contaminated. He shook his head, knowing it was too late to worry. He had been vaccinated against the plague

back East, seven years before, but he doubted his present immunity. He looked around, and saw how the crowd was shrinking. Men were deserting the Silver Cup. The saloon's swamper brought a thick blanket; Mowry took it and, spreading it on the floor, lifted the sick man upon it.

"Give a hand here," he ordered, and the swamper and two other men helped carry the burden, each taking a corner hold on the blanket, to a back room. Sam Keever protested violently, but Quiet John Mowry's voice took on a knife-sharp quality. "Stand aside, Sam. This man can't be taken outside!"

Placing the sick man upon the floor in the small back room, the three helpers fled and left Mowry alone. A bottle of whiskey stood on the room's poker table, and Mowry took it and forced a swallow of the fiery liquor between his patient's lips. The stranger seemed to strangle at first, then he swallowed. An instant later, he sighed and opened his eyes.

"You're all right now, friend," Mowry said. "You're among friends. A doctor will be here shortly. You're stricken by smallpox, eh?"

Judea Smith could speak only in a hollow whisper. "It is true, my friend. My whole colony is stricken, and my people are dying—" He choked, and his eyes grew dull. Mowry fed him more whiskey. Then he went on. "I prayed, but it did no good. So I have come seeking help."

"Maybe God only helps those who help themselves," Mowry said.

"True," muttered Judea Smith. "I understand that now. Mere prayers are not enough, and people cannot cut themselves off, as did we Tithemen, from their fellowmen. The colony needs a doctor, medicine—"

His voice broke, did not resume. The gaunt body stiffened. The man was dead.

Doc Caswell came bustling in, a fat and pompous man with an overly self-important manner. As the boom town's only doctor, Caswell was prosperous. His practice was almost wholly a business of treating gun and knife wounds and of setting bones broken in work at the mines and diggings. His clothes gave off an odor that was partly iodoform and partly whiskey. Evenings, Doc Caswell was usually half drunk.

"Dead, eh?" he muttered after a glance at the man on the floor. "Too bad. Judea Smith was a great man, in his own way. Looks like measles."

"Smallpox," said Quiet John Mowry.

"Measles," said Caswell, eyeing him narrowly. "Sam Keever wants it to be measles. Shucks, Quiet John; we can't have smallpox here in Palisade City. Why, it'd ruin the town's business!"

Mowry let that pass; he knew the futility of arguing against the making of profit. He followed Doc Caswell from the back room, and out front, gathered at the bar, were Sam Keever, Bonnie Mason, and a few of the Silver Cup's employees. The crowd had departed to seek a saloon untouched by the plague. Sam Keever said worriedly, "What do you say, Doc?"

"Measles," said Doc Caswell. "Nothing more serious than measles." He smiled slyly. "I'll see that the whole town knows."

QUIET JOHN MOWRY frowned, thinking of those people at the religious colony. Judea Smith had said his people were dying—not of measles, but of smallpox. And the old patriarch had been right. Mowry knew the symptoms of smallpox. The colony needed a doctor and medicine, and fat Doc Caswell stood there smiling and lying about measles.

"Doc, Judea Smith came to town for help," he said. "His colony is stricken. It's your job to go to New Hope Valley—"

"You crazy, Mowry?" said Caswell. "Those Tithemen don't believe in medicine. When they get sick, they pray. Besides, man, I got more work here than one doctor can handle."

"You won't go, Doc?"

"That's right, friend."

Mowry drew a sharp breath, like a person plunging into chill water. "Then I'll go, Doc," he said. "All you've got to do is to supply the proper medicine." He saw the doctor start to protest, and he knew that Sam Keever would back Caswell up. So Mowry moved first. He drew a short-barreled derringer from inside his coat. He levelled the weapon at Doc Caswell's paunchy middle. "I'll take that medicine, Doc. Lead the way to your office!"

The door swung open and Sheriff Ab Hughes came in. The old lawman said, "What's all this?"

Quiet John Mowry knew Sheriff Hughes for a honest lawman and a citizen of decent instincts, so he explained about the dead man and the sick people at the Tithemen colony. Sheriff Hughes nodded, and said, "It's Doc Caswell's job to go, but we can't force him. Doc, you willing to let Mowry have the medicine?"

Doc Caswell was red-faced with rage, and he was no longer half-drunk. "I'll give him the drugs, under threat of force," he growled. "But, if he goes to the colony and practices medicine without a license, it'll be breaking the law. And, by damn, I'll see that he's prosecuted!"

"Your privilege," said Quiet John Mowry.

"I'll see you sent to the pen," Caswell went on. "I know all about you, John Mowry. Yeah. I know about you being a medical student back East, and I know what happened to get you kicked out of school. You teamed up with a quack surgeon, helped him perform an operation that shouldn't have been performed—and the victim of your butchery died!"

The face of Quiet John Mowry was suddenly pale. He had hidden from his unfortunate past for seven years. It would do no good now to say that if the operation had succeeded, he and that surgeon would have been the benefactors of mankind. The operation *had* succeeded, but the patient's heart had failed . . .

Mowry shoved the derringer back into his pocket, and said, "We'll get that medicine, Doc."

WRAPPED in overcoat, muffler and fur cap, Quiet John Mowry rode a horse from the Trail Livery. Tied to the cantle of the saddle was an oilcloth-wrapped bundle of medicines from Doc Caswell's office. The wintry wind was howling, and snow was swept along the street in whirling gusts. The figure of a woman came running through the blizzard. "John! John!—wait!"

Mowry reined in and looked down at Bonnie Mason's pretty face. She was shivering and her face, through its powder and paint, had a pinched look from the cold. A buxom woman, Bonnie, attractive though no longer young. She and Quiet John Mowry were friends; there was a deep understanding between them.

"John, you can't do this," Bonnie said, a hint of hysteria in her voice. "Don't you see? Once you've been where the plague is, you can't come back here. People will be afraid of you—of anything you touch. John, you've got to consider me!"

"Bonnie, I keep thinking of those people—"

"Do they mean more to you than I do?"

"It's not that, Bonnie."

"John, you can't risk it," the woman cried. "You can't! You might take the plague!" Now the hysteria in her voice was fury. "I waited and waited for you, when other men wanted me, and now you turn your back on me. John, Sam Keever wants to marry me—and if you go—"

"Bonnie," said Quiet John Mowry, "I've got to go."

He swung his horse and rode away, not looking back.

Why he had to go to help the suffering folk at the colony, Mowry did not know. Once before he had tried to extend a helping hand to his fellow men, and in consequence his life, as he had blueprinted it, had been ruined. Now, on an impulse, he had lost Bonnie Mason's friendship. The Faro Queen considered him going on a fool's errand, not on an errand of mercy. And, as for Doc Caswell, the medico's professional pride had been stung, and he would want revenge. Caswell was influential, and he could have Quiet John Mowry charged with practicing medicine without a license. Then, too, there was Sam Keever. The saloon-owner was not a man who took to being crossed, and tomorrow night a new gambler would fill Quiet John Mowry's place at the faro table . . . Why was he making this ride through the blizzard? Mowry did not know.

It was a long ride, and a hard ride. The cold crept through Mowry's clothes, settled in the very marrow of his bones. The wind beat against him, and his face was constantly slashed by snow that stung like tiny particles of glass. He had to fight to keep his horse moving. The road was at times obscured by darkness and snow, and Mowry began to fear that he would lose his way. It was twenty miles to the colony in New Hope Valley. New Hope . . . Mowry thought of that plague-ridden place and wondered if Despair would not be a better name.

It was well past midnight when a householder, roused by the muffled sound of a horse and rider, opened his door, and holding a lantern high, peered into the snowstorm. He called out, "Stranger, who are you? We've got pestilence here. If you're no medico, don't tarry!"

Quiet John Mowry was roused by the voice. It took him a full minute to realize where he was; his body ached from the cold, his mind was numbed by it, and he was only vaguely aware that if he had missed this place, in the blinding snow, his errand of mercy would have ended in his own death. Stiffly, he dismounted. On leaden legs, he made his way to the house. He said hollowly, "Friend, I have come to help. There is medicine on my saddle. Fetch it. Take care of my horse."

The warmth of the house wrapped him like a comforting blanket. There was a glowing fireplace; he went and stood before it. The house was merely one big room; kitchen, bedroom, living-room combined. An oil lamp, turned low, hung from the timbered ceiling and cast a pale yellow glow. There were two wooden beds, partially shielded by a flour-sack curtain hanging from the ceiling and giving the sick who lay in the beds some scant privacy. There was a woman and a small boy.

The householder came in carrying the oilcloth-wrapped bundle. "I put your horse up in my barn, friend." He was a red-bearded man with tired eyes and a haggard look. "My wife and my son," he whispered, "they're mighty sick."

Quiet John Mowry nodded. He removed his hat and muffler and heavy coat. He opened his bundle and took out a fever thermometer. "Fix me up something hot to drink," he told the householder, and went behind the curtain. There was a heavy fear in him. It was seven years since his medical studies . . .

AN HOUR LATER, Mowry left that house. He had done all it was possible to do for the woman and boy, at the time. The rest must be left to God, he had told the householder, and had left that harassed man praying. Mowry took his bundle with him, made his way through the howling storm toward the frosted, lighted windows of the colony's frame church. The householder had told him that twenty of the sick had been placed on beds there, in an attempt to isolate the plague. Bone-tired, uncertain in his mind, Mowry asked himself, "Why am I here?" He wanted to know the reason. He owed these people nothing. They were not his kind. He belonged back in Palisade City, with Sam Keever and Bonnie Mason. *Why am I here?* A fool could not answer a fool's question!

A woman was moving quietly among the sick beds when Mowry entered the church. She was a young woman in a stern, plain gray dress. Her face was pale with weariness, but she was smiling as she spoke to one of her patients. She had a wealth of yellow hair, braided and coiled like a crown on her head. Mowry stared at her and thought, *Like a golden angel in gray. . . .*

Aloud, he said, "I have brought medicine."

The woman—she was very young—looked up. The hope that brightened her tired face was a wonderful thing to see. She said, "I'm so glad you have come. Judea Smith must have brought you."

Mowry nodded, not saying that Judea Smith was dead. The girl came toward him, to take his bundle, and she halted abruptly and stared at him in open wonder. Quiet John Mowry remembered her, then. He had seen her before, some months ago on the streets of Palisade City. She had been with one of the colonists, a big bearded man like Judea Smith—her husband, perhaps, Mowry thought. He remembered how the girl had looked at him, and how the man had taken her arm and drawn her away.

He said, "We will do what we can. Perhaps we can save some of these people. But we can only hope."

"And pray," said the girl.

They worked together, administering medicine and applying ointment to sores and watching for fevers to break. It was gruelling work, even with medicine to help, and Mowry marvelled at the way the way the girl held up. The epidemic had been under way for two weeks, and Faith Turner had been nursing people all that time. She did not complain, nor did she ask for any reward. She gave from the heart, and, as the night hours passed, Quiet John Mowry found himself compar-

ing Faith Turner with Bonnie Mason. Bonnie would have turned her back upon this misery. Bonnie had not wanted him to come here. A strange thing, but Mowry could now see the Faro Queen with clearer eyes. He remembered Bonnie saying, "John, you and I . . . . we could make a fortune. Let's team up and head for San Francisco. We could open a gambling place on the Barbary Coast . . ."

By gray dawn, when the blizzard broke, Mowry and the girl had finished what could be done for the time. Faith busied herself at the cookstove that had been set up at one end of the long room; she made a big pot of coffee. When they sat drinking the hot brew, she looked shyly at Mowry and said, "I saw you before, in Palisade City."

"I know. You smiled at me."

Color tinted her pale cheeks, and because she was honest she said, "I thought you were handsome. The handsomest man I ever had seen."

"The man with you hurried you away."

"Yes. My brother—God rest his soul." She had already told Mowry that her brother had been one of the first to die of the plague. "He said that you were a gambler—a man of sin."

"He was right," Mowry said. "I am not a doctor."

They looked at one another, deep into each other's eyes, and Quiet John Mowry felt stirred by Faith Turner as he never had been stirred by Bonnie Mason. And Faith? The look in her blue eyes, the soft smile upon her lips, was all-revealing. She saw in him the answer to the things in a woman's secret heart. It could not be, Mowry told himself. He must have no thoughts, no hopes about this girl. He was not her kind. He was a gambler, a wastrel who idled his life away. He put down his empty cup and stood up, and he said gruffly, "There must be others who need medicine. I'll go do what I can."

THE DAYS faded one into another, and the virulent disease ran its ugly course. New cases appeared and people died, but Quiet John Mowry and his medicine saved lives. By the end of the week, there was a change for the better. The seventh day after Mowry's arrival there were no new cases and no deaths. Hope was brighter in the colony, and the simple folk looked upon Quiet John Mowry as a savior.

He worked endlessly, resting and sleeping only a few hours each night. He lost himself in his work, and if he gave thanks it was for the four years of medical training he had had. At times he could look back upon his faro dealing, which now seemed far remote, and realize that he had been merely marking time. He had been waiting for something to happen so that he could find himself.

Find himself?

He had found himself in this colony, among these simple folk who tilled the soil and found their pleasure in worship. And when he was at the church, working with Faith Turner, he knew a serenity and happiness that he wished to keep. Yet he knew that it would end. He was a restless man, knowing the excitement of the outer world, and he could not remain in such a place. Faith Turner, with her high promise of companionship, was not for him. Soon, he would turn his back upon this place and upon her.

The girl said, that good seventh day as they shared a meal she had cooked, "This valley will miss you, John, when you go away." She looked wistfully at him. "You will go, I suppose?"

"Yes, I shall go."

"I guess there are beautiful women in your world."

He wanted to say, "None so beautiful as you, Faith," but that, he knew, would be wrong. He told her, "Yes, many beautiful women."

Faith sighed, and said, "I would like to see beyond this valley, but I suppose I never shall. Unless—unless someone comes and takes me away." Again she looked hopefully at Quiet John Mowry.

And he said, "Faith, you belong here."

She rose from her chair, turned from him, and he saw her sway. He rose quickly and caught hold of her arms, thinking that she was about to fall. He turned her about, so that she faced him and he could study her face. The fear was in him that Faith had contracted the sickness. It was a wild fear . . . her beautiful face marred, as the plague's victims were marred through life.

"Faith, do you feel sick?"

"Just tired, John."

He was still afraid, but in the end it was not Faith who became ill. It was Quiet John Mowry.

He felt suddenly, strangely weak, and then he collapsed in a heap as he walked through the snow from the church to one of the colony's houses. Two of the Tithemen carried him into the church and put him to bed, and he lay there burning with fever—not knowing what had happened. He was seized by delirium and strange things filled his mind. It seemed at times that he was quarreling with Sam Keever and Doc Caswell, and sometimes it would be Bonnie Mason. He talked and he cried out, and he thought he was busy dealing faro . . . He suffered and was tormented, and in his few lucid moments he had no will to live.

When he was conscious, Faith Turner was always there beside him — bending over him, smiling at him through tears. There would be other people there, too, watching him anxiously. And once he heard, though he did not wholly understand, Faith saying, "But there *is* no more medicine. He used it all on the others!"

He lay there in his fever and his weakness, for how long he knew not, then all at once his mind was clear and he was merely tired—tired to utter exhaustion. And three days had passed.

"Faith?"

He spoke to the face looking down at him, but it was not the face of Faith. It was a fat and ugly face, Doc Caswell's. The mingled smells of iodoform and whiskey still clung to the medico of Palisade City. With a pudgy hand, he felt for Quiet John Mowry's pulse. He counted the pulse rate, his bleary eyes on his watch, and finally he showed a benign smile. "You'll do, John. Even bullets couldn't kill you, much less—shall we say, measles?"

Doc Caswell chuckled as at a joke, then he yawned hugely. "Dead for sleep," he growled. "Been awake all night, caring for you, John. Been here two days, now. When I arrived, I wouldn't have bet a lead dollar on your chances. But that girl—"

"Doc, where is she?" Mowry managed to say. "Is she all right?"

"I put her to bed when your fever began to break," the medico said. He shook his head. "If you had died, John, she would have simply wilted away. How come you deserve the love of a woman like that?"

"Doc, don't say that! I'm no good for her."

"Tut, man. You're the only husband she'll ever want." Doc Caswell yawned again. "Wish I could say, John, that I had come here of my own accord. But I didn't and that's a black mark against me. Faith Turner came to town and told me how you had worked here, and she begged me. Well, I'm a hardhearted cuss but I couldn't refuse a girl like that. So here I am, dead on my feet."

"What of Bonnie, Doc?"

"Married. Married Sam Keever, John."

"That's good," said Quiet John Mowry, and fell asleep.

WHEN he next woke, Faith was sitting beside him. And half a dozen of the bearded Tithemen stood nearby. Faith said softly, "John, some of my people wish to speak to you."

A man named Burton stepped forward, and said, "Friend Mowry, you will soon leave us, but we cannot let you go without showing our gratitude. Ask what you will of us, and it shall be given. We are not poor. We have money, land . . ."

Quiet John Mowry felt choked up. He looked at Faith and saw the brave look in her eyes. She believed he would leave and that she would never see him again, and she was trying hard not to show hurt. Hurt? Mowry knew that he could not hurt her, for the rest of the days of her life. And he could not hurt a single member of this colony, after having fought to save them. He reached out and took Faith's hand.

"I'll take you up on that, my friends," he said. "Will you give me Faith?"

It was not a question that Quiet John Mowry needed answered in words. He already had been given Faith, in more ways than one.

FRONTIER KNIFE--

by WALTER GALLI

UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST FAMOUS KNIFE OF FRONTIER DAYS WAS THE BOWIE...IT WAS DESIGNED BY COLONEL BOWIE, LEGENDARY FIGURE OF THE OLD SOUTHWEST-- WHO MET HIS DEATH IN THE GALLANT DEFENSE OF THE ALAMO....

..1836...

BOWIE IS SAID TO HAVE ENGAGED IN MORE DESPERATE PERSONAL CONFLICTS THAN ANY OTHER MAN IN THE WEST!!

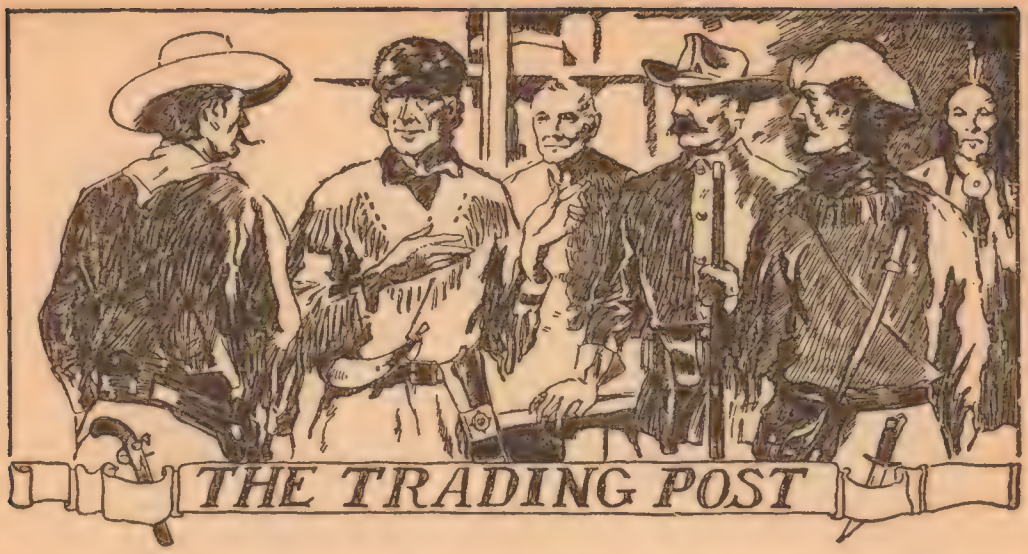
THE BOWIE SURE PLAYED A BIG PART IN THE WINNING OF THE WEST...

SAYS THE OLD SCOUT...

--DAVY CROCKETT--

IN HIS FAMOUS AUTOBIOGRAPHY HAS THIS TO SAY ABOUT BOWIE AND HIS KNIFE... "I FOUND COLONEL BOWIE, OF LOUISIANA, IN THE FORTRESS (ALAMO)... I WAS INTRODUCED TO HIM BY COLONEL TRAVIS, AND HE GAVE ME A FRIENDLY WELCOME...WHILE WE WERE CONVERSING HE HAD OCCASION TO DRAW HIS FAMOUS KNIFE TO CUT A STRAP--AND I WISH I MAY BE SHOT IF THE BARE SIGHT OF IT WASN'T ENOUGH TO GIVE A MAN OF SQUEAMISH STOMACH THE CHOLIC, SPECIALLY BEFORE BREAKFAST. HE SAW I WAS ADMIRING IT, AND SAID HE, 'COLONEL, YOU MIGHT TICKLE A FELLOW'S RIBS A LONG TIME WITH THIS LITTLE INSTRUMENT BEFORE YOU'D MAKE HIM LAUGH; AND MANY A TIME I SEEN A MAN PUKE AT THE IDEA OF THE POINT TOUCHING THE PIT OF HIS STOMACH.' "

!!!



Any old-timers wishing to yarn about their early experiences will always be welcome to the TRADING POST. In fact, we offer $10 to the mossyhorn who spins the most exciting, smokiest yet authentic tale of early days. Each issue will print one or more of these reminiscences, but only the best will collect. Winning yarns of over 1,000 words will be paid for at a cent a word. Dig down into the war-bags of your memory and give us a tale of the great old days. Mail your stories to the TRADING POST, care of FRONTIER STORIES.

But other things sometimes come to the TRADING POST and we feel we must print them, too. Such is the letter below—from a reader who we believe has a right to his opinion. Whenever such letters come to us, we feel that our readers are entitled to see them.

—THE EDITOR.

Louisville, Ky.

DEAR EDITOR:

Having been a student of "Jesse James literature" for fifteen or more years and having, as a hobby collected almost everything that has been printed on him and his gang, pertaining to his deeds of outlawry in that period of our history, I believe that I can classify as something more than just a "green hand" at passing judgment on any story or article that purports to tell of some of his and his gang's actions.

I believe that I have about as extensive a library on the subject of banks, trains and stage-coach robbers, bad-men and bandits of the early days of our history as can be found anywhere in the United States.

I mention all this simply as evidence that what I have to say will not be construed as being just a case of "running off at the mouth."

It is all occasioned by an article published in your Fall issue by a Mr. Buck Ringoe and titled, "Here Comes Jesse James." Mr. Ringoe's little opus is rather interesting reading matter, but I believe that if I knew as little about a subject as Mr. Ringoe evidently does of that particular one, I'd try my hand at something that I did know something about. His story, to me, at least, was "a pain in the neck," I don't believe that I can ever recall reading a story that had more mistakes and inaccuracies in it than had Mr. Ringoe's article.

I was rather surprised, too, for heretofore the majority of the articles and stories appearing in your magazine have been pretty near authentic so far as details were concerned. Just where Mr. Ringoe got his "facts" (sic) or his "information" it

would be rather hard to say, but I am rather of the opinion that he drew on his imagination for about seventy-five per cent of his matter and probably got the balance of it from the old "blood and thunder" novels.

Mr. Ringoe's mistakes are so many I'll only point out a very few. For instance, he says that Jesse James joined Quantrell when he was twelve years of age. As Jesse was born September 5th, 1847, and didn't become a guerrilla until 1862, he must have been over fifteen (if my arithmetic is correct!).

Likewise, Jesse was never under Quantrell's direct command, but was a member of Bill Anderson's gang—the infamous "Bloody Bill."

Also, Mr. Ringoe refers to Quantrell as Charles William Quantrell. That is simply another of his many "mistakes." Quantrell's name was William Clarke Quantrell and he was born at Canal Dover in Ohio, July 31, 1837.

Mr. Ringoe further goes on to mis-write history by saying (page 85), "Frank James, however, was born in Kentucky. In Scott County, to be exact." As a matter of fact and of record, Alexander Franklin James (to give him his full name) was born in Jackson County, Missouri, about three miles from Kearney (then known as Centerville), on January 10th, 1843.

Detective Allen was not killed by Frank and Jesse James, but by the two Younger brothers, John and Jim. John Younger was killed, as was also Daniels. Allen was badly wounded and died about six weeks later in Chicago. Also, Mr. Ringoe, Daniels was not a Pinkerton operative; he was a local deputy sheriff or, rather, a former deputy sheriff that Allen and Wright had hired to act as their guide.

Detective John W. Wicher, another Pinkerton operative, had been killed on March 12, 1874, four days previously and not, as Mr. Ringoe says, by Frank and Jesse James. But Mr. Ringoe was twenty-five per cent "right" for once. Jesse James had as his assistants in that particular killing Jim Anderson and Bradley Collins.

Once again, Mr. Ringoe, Jesse James was killed by "Bob" Ford, the killing taking place at 1381 Lafayette St., St. Joseph, Missouri. The date: April 3, 1882. Ford shot Jesse, not as Mr. Ringoe says, with Jesse's own revolver, but with his own, and while Jesse was standing on a chair, his back turned to Ford and his weapons laying on the bed where he had discarded them a few moments previously. His brother, Charlie was in the room at the time, but Bob fired the shot.

Once more, Mr. Ringoe, Frank James was never pardoned, for the very good and sufficient reason that he was never convicted. Tried twice, he was both times acquitted for lack of evidence. He died in 1915, I believe. His body was cremated and the urn containing his ashes is now resting in the vaults of one of Kansas City's better-known banks (no kidding!).

Cole Younger died in 1916 and is buried at Lee's Summit, Missouri—which brings to mind that Mr. Ringoe also states that the Youngers were cousins. I am curious on just what he bases that assertion. I can find no evidence that they were any relation.

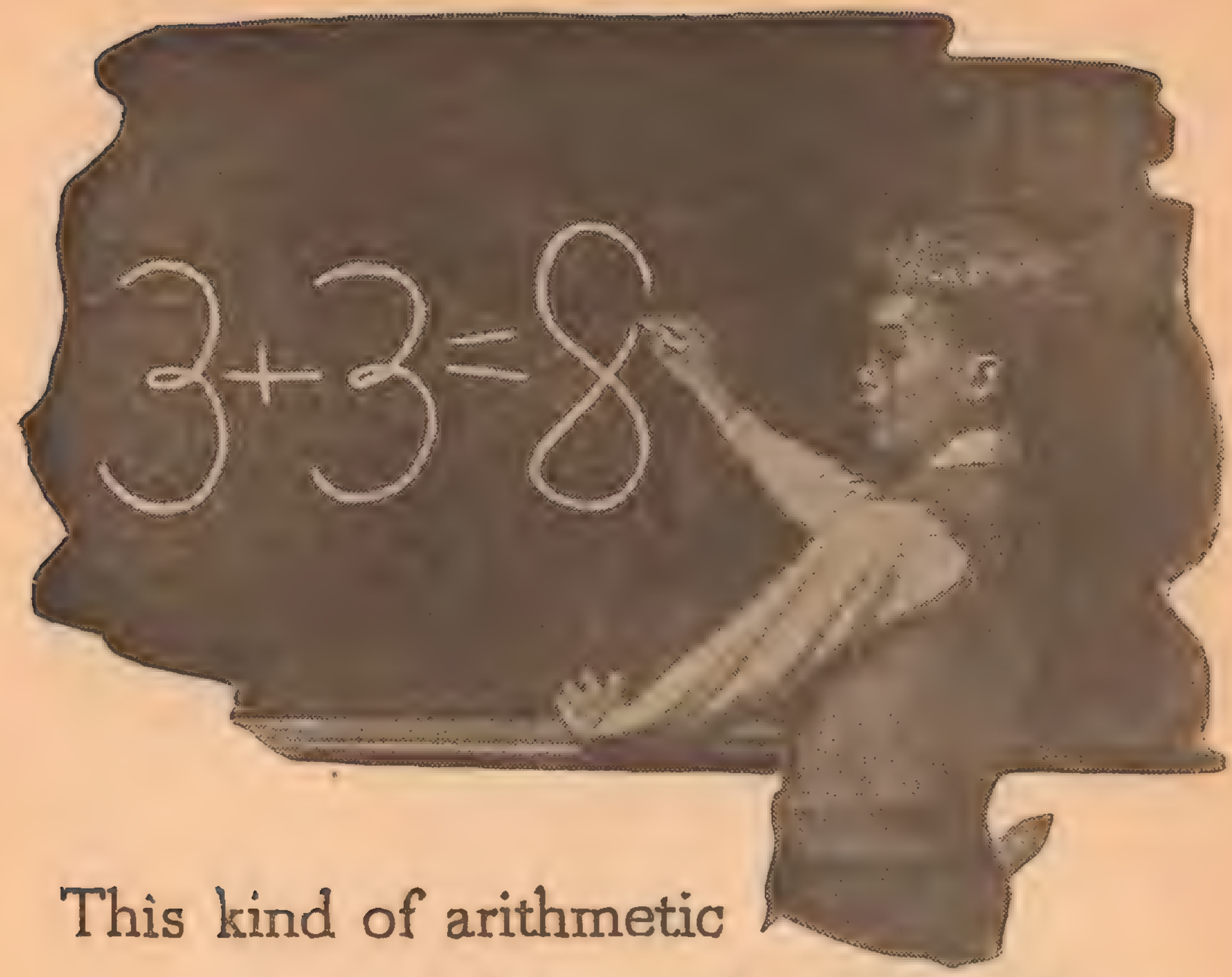
Mr. Ringoe states that Johnny Berry, Bob Moore, Patsey Martin, "Big John" Cameron, "Comanche Tony" and Dave Cummings were members of the gang. I can find no evidence to support *that* statement, either. However, there was a James Robert Cummins (note the spelling, Mr. Ringoe) who was said to have been a member of the gang. At any rate, Mr. Cummins was one of Quantrell's guerrillas, but he was never arrested as a member of the James Gang and he never "surrendered" at the close of the war. He died a few years ago in the Confederate Veterans Home at Higginsville, Missouri.

I do not mean this letter as a "knock," but it would seem that when an article is written under a "true facts" premise it should at least be somewhat on the accurate side. At least, the writer should try to verify facts before he puts them before the public.

I'd recommend "Quantrell and the Border Wars," by William Connelley, and "The Rise and Fall of Jesse James," by Robertus Love, as pretty authentic works on this subject. Both of those boys are absolutely reliable and truthful in all essential details.

Sincerely yours,

CHARLES E. BELL.



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A hitch of his shoulder

COMANCHE JOHN— DEAD OR ALIVE

By DAN CUSHMAN

THE BLACK-WHISKERED MAN nudged his pinto pony down the rocky main street of Skinner's Point at a wary wolf-trot. On reaching the two-story log structure which was evidently the river town's pride, he pulled up and sat for a while, looking around from beneath the droopy brim of his slouch hat. To a casual observer he might have appeared indolent —a loafer on horseback, but his eyes were quick and shrewd, and his grimy hands rested not far from the butts of his two cap-and-ball pistols.

All was quiet. A couple of freight wag-

and a navy was in his hand.

Along the turbulent Missouri, through brawling river-towns, over dusty, dangerous trails, the Vigilantes hunted him, knuckles white on their guns. But the only trail he left for them was a steadily lengthening song, each new verse a fresh challenge.

ons were loading at the Diamond K warehouse. Farther on, where the Missouri river cut a wide arc around the town, three steamboats lay at rest, decks deserted and boilers cold.

The black-whiskered man plastered a fragment of white quartz with a spurt of tobacco juice, and chuckled in a manner which showed he was well satisfied.

"Shore peaceful here in Skinner's Point, Patches—and peaceful is the way we want her, ain't it?"

Patches lifted one ear in agreement. The saddle leather creaked as the whiskered man reached for the ground with a scuffed jackboot. He looped a rein to the hitch-rack in such a manner that a single jerk would loosen it, then he slouched down the corduroy sidewalk. At the door of the stage office, he drew up to squint at a poster.

The poster was large, with big print, and it bore the woodcut likeness of a man. He viewed it from several angles, and took

time to gnaw a fresh cheekful from his plug of blackstrap tobacco. By that time a young fellow wearing a leather eyeshade had approached and was about to pass by. The black-whiskered one hailed him.

"Young man, would you mind readin' this here poster? My eddication wasn't such as to include the three R's."

The young man complied. "It says, 'Wanted.' That's the big print across the top. Then beneath the picture it says, 'A liberal reward in Yankee Bar dust will be paid for the capture, dead or alive, of one Comanche John, road agent.' "

"*One* Comanche John, did you say? Great Jehosaphat, son, is there more'n one of 'em?"

The young man laughed. "No. That's just a formality of speech."

"So that's a picture of Comanche John, is it? He's become some famous of late. Seems like I'd heered a song they made up about him." He looked at the face on the poster and chawed disapprovingly. "If they's one thing I can't abide, it's a road agent."

A couple more men had drifted up by this time. They stopped to look at the poster, too. Then a long, loose-jawed fellow came up, wearing a sheriff's star, and the others treated him with deference.

"Admiring him?" the sheriff asked.

"Wouldn't say that," drawled the whiskered one, "but I'd admire some o' that Yankee Bar dust they're givin' in reward. Might pay a man to keep his eye out, if there was enough of it."

The sheriff swaggered a little, "I'd advise this here Comanche John to stay clear of Skinner's Point if he wants to stay healthy. Road agents don't last long around here since I got elected."

The whiskered man rolled his chaw of blackstrap around in his cheek and squinted at the poster from a couple of new angles, "Unpleasant lookin' varmint, ain't he?"

The sheriff snickered from the side of his big, loose mouth. "Stranger, I was just thinkin' that he looked considerable like you. Now, hold on. No insult intended. But you got to admit there's a considerable similarity."

THE BLACK-WHISKERED MAN moved around to catch his own reflection in a nearby window. "Waal, now! Maybe you're right. Yes sir, maybe you are! Why, dingblast their hide—what do they mean, puttin' my face on that poster? If there was some courts worth the name here in Montana Territory, I'd sue them highbinders over in Yankee Bar. The idee o' puttin' my likeness up thar over the name of a lawless, coach-robbin' reptile like Comanche John—"

"Now, calm down. It ain't the fault of the vigilance committee over at Yankee Bar if you happen to look alike. You wouldn't have a legal leg to stand on."

"I wouldn't? Waal, now, that's a fine state of affairs. What's a gov'ment for? A man has to pay taxes and then what?—he's treated like a criminal!"

"No sir, not a legal leg. It's nothin' to raise a ruckus about."

"It's all right for you to talk, Sheriff. They ain't got your pitcher up thar bein' slandered by every passerby. A reputation bein' ruint. . . ."

The black-whiskered one was so busy fulminating that he failed to notice the old man who came jogging on the back of a sleepy mule. He was gaunt and tall with ragged gray whiskers and a pair of piercing, Old-Testament eyes. He wore a long, black coat, such as gamblers favor—but he was no gambler. His true profession was indicated by the Bible which was thrust in his coattail pocket.

The talk by the express office was too ordinary an occurence to attract his attention, so the preacher continued on down the bumpy street, his head nodding with each step of the mule, his troubled gaze fixed on the distant, blue line of bluffs which rose beyond the Missouri. But finally the blaring voice of the black-whiskered man intruded his reverie. He jerked stiffly erect.

"Waal, bless me!" he croaked, reining in and whacking his bony thigh. "It's Comanche John! Why, I heered they'd hung you over at Last Chance. Glad to see you!"

It was a second before the words registered on the sheriff, but Comanche John did not hesitate. He was on his way down the sidewalk with a series of jackrabbit leaps; he vaulted the hitchrack and loosed the reins while one foot was reaching for the stirrup. The pinto, recognizing an emergency, was away with a snort and a

gallop before the seat of John's pants touched the saddle.

"Halt!" bellowed the sheriff, simultaneously going for his right-hand pistol. But a corresponding movement of Comanche John's was swifter. A hitch of his shoulder, that was all, and a navy was in his hand. He turned in the saddle; a heavy report rocked the afternoon air. The sheriff's gun spun from his hand. He cursed and grabbed his forearm where the lead splinters had burned it. It was three or four seconds before he went for his other gun, and by that time Comanche John was fifty yards away. The sheriff tried to draw a bead. He fired.

At the same instant the pinto stumbled and pawed frantically for a footing. It seemed for a moment that the sheriff's bullet had taken effect, but three rapid puffs of dust far down toward the steamboat docks indicated that it had gone wide—the pinto had been thrown off balance by stepping into a rut. The animal went nose down. For a second he was four hoofs in the air. Comanche John was sent skidding to collide with a hitch post. He was stunned—groggy, but not unconscious. He sat up and fumbled to pull his battered hat away from his face. When he finally got his bearings, the sheriff's navy was leveled on his heart.

"You're under arrest," panted the sheriff.

COMANCHE JOHN gathered himself up painfully from the hard roadway. "Yep, Sheriff," he grinned, "it looks like you went and made a hero out of yourself."

The sheriff preened himself for the benefit of the crowd which had been brought out by the excitement. "Told you what would happen if that Comanche John varmint ever showed up at Skinner's Point, didn't I? They may sing songs about him, but he ain't takin' this camp over, by grab! Not while I'm sheriff. Here—keep your forepaws away from them guns. I'll take 'em so you won't be tempted. No, Hank, you take 'em while I keep him covered. Thar, that's better. Now I guess I'd better march you down to our new jail before you get any ideas. . . ."

The sky-pilot now rode up, having urged his mule to a bumpy trot. He hopped off like an animated scarecrow and peered at Comanche John who was caressing a bruised knee with one hand, and a skinned shoulder with the other.

"Humph! You seem to be in one piece," said the sky-pilot.

"One piece! Sure I am, but through no fault o' you'rn, you Bible-shoutin' old buzzard. Why couldn't you keep your fly-trap shut for a second? I had this big Pike's Peaker of a sheriff eatin' hay out of my pocket. Well, let it go—I don't cultivate grudges, but if you choke some night sayin' 'Jeremiah,' don't expect some tears from me."

The old man seemed genuinely sorry. "Don't tell me you're in trouble in this camp, too!"

"Seems I am," moaned John, looking sadly at a rent in his homespuns. "The same old persecution! Now it's that sidewindin' gang o' claim-jumpers over in Yankee Bar that goes by the name of a vigilance committee. They went and printed up a batch o' posters slanderin' my good name, and sayin' I'd robbed the Last Chance coach. Sheriff, the Parson here is familiar with my moral rectitude. Ask him about me. He'll say I'm innocent as a babe unborn. Share and share alike, that's my motto—"

"You can present that plea to the court," the sheriff said smugly. "Judge Doolin will give you plenty chance to talk before he sentences you to hang."

"Sounds like the law here in Skinner's Point had the habit of bein' abrupt," opined Comanche John.

"Our sheriff is sometimes carried away by his enthusiasm!"

This was a new voice—restrained, yet it had a crisp tone which made everyone listen. John watched while a man came toward him, passing with graceful stride through the way the crowd had opened for him. He was tall, handsome, and faultlessly dressed—perhaps no more than thirty-five years old, although his wavy, dark hair was already edged with gray. He looked down on John, who was a head shorter, and smiled.

"Contrary to any impression Sheriff Kurdy has given you, the town of Skinner's Point does not execute men without evidence." The tall man turned abruptly on the sheriff who now seemed considerably shrunken in stature, "Kurdy, just what charge do you have against this man?"

When the sheriff hesitated, Comanche John spoke up in a tone of aggrieved dignity, "No evidence whatever. Not a stitch. I came ridin' into this yere camp o' your'n, peaceful as a white-tailed bunny at a rattlesnake's convention, when all of a sudden this hoss-faced varmint with the badge on his jerkin commenced tossin' pistol balls my way. Well, nachilly, me bein' a peaceful man, I—"

Sheriff Kurdy now found his voice, "Do you know who this varmint is, Captain Cutter?"

"I neither know nor care," the captain responded coldly.

This took the sheriff down several notches more. "Why, that's Comanche John—Comanche John, the road-agent. They'd 'a' hung him in California if he'd stayed, so he shinned out for the Fraser, and when it got too warm for him there, he—"

John haw-hawed derisively, "Listen to him, Cap'n! Listen to the sheriff thar talk about Californy! Why, he don't even know how to pronounce the name!"

Captain Cutter smiled in his habitually cold manner, and went on to the sheriff, "Well, what if he is Comanche John? What of it?"

"There's a reward notice posted for him over at the express office, that's what. He's wanted by the vigilance committee over at Yankee Bar. He robbed the Last Chance coach and—"

Captain Cutter turned abruptly to Comanche John, "Did you rob the Last Chance coach?"

"Me?" Comanche John looked aghast. "So help me, Cap'n, I'm as innocent as a new-born babe!"

The Parson made himself heard by snorting several times through his pinched old nostrils, but he managed to hold his tongue. Captain Cutter, however, seemed willing to accept Comanche John's statement. He moved a finely-formed hand in a gesture which seemed to say, "Well, that settles that."

He said, "Sheriff, all you actually have against this man is a printshop dodger from Yankee Bar. Yankee Bar happens to be a good distance off and, anyway, I don't see why we should be running down their suspects for them."

The sheriff shrugged and strode off, muttering. However, some of the onlookers seemed not to give in so easily. Sensing their objections, Cutter turned on them, "Maybe some of you gentlemen think otherwise. If you do, speak up. However, as head of the vigilance committee here, I hold to this principle—any man who comes to Skinner's Point is as good as any other. His past is his own business. What's that song I've heard you men singing?" He sang a few lines of the popular frontier ditty, his voice a melodious baritone.

"Oh, what was your name in The States?
Was it Thompson, or Johnson, or Yates?
Did you strangle your wife
And run for your life?
Oh, what was your name in The States?"

THE CAPTAIN'S REASONING produced a wave of approval. Several of the men looked nonplussed and several others laughed. It was true—there were many things, besides gold and fur, which sent men West in the 'Sixties. The captain went on. "If this man behaves himself, I don't care whether he's Comanche John, or Judas. But, if he doesn't behave, then I say the sooner he does his polka on the end of a rope the better."

"Amen," said Comanche John piously. "I hold that a right Christian attitude."

The crowd broke up and straggled away. Captain Cutter and the Parson watched them go, while Comanche John gravely inspected Patches' fetlocks. Then the captain turned to him. "Come to my office in half an hour. It's over the Diamond K warehouse."

Without waiting for an answer, he spun on the toe of his exquisite boot and strode away along the corduroy sidewalk. In a minute or two, Comanche John and the Parson were alone.

"Revener, you'll be the hangin' of me yet," growled John. "By the way, that was a noble gent, that Cap'n—"

"Call him noble if you like, but I got better words for that varmint."

Comanche John chuckled, "You always did talk that-a-way about them as didn't come down to the mourner's bench at your mission."

The Parson snorted. "That sidewheeler's up to somethin', and if you want my opinion—"

"Now, Revener," John chawed placidly, "don't be too hard on the Cap'n. Likely he jest wants to talk over the war of the Confederacy, or such. You know how it is when a couple of Southern gentlemen like he and myself get together."

"He's up to some dirty work, and him wantin' to talk with a road agent like you only proves it."

"Now, Parson—"

"He's crooked as a bullsnake, and I don't like his way of doin' business. Take that freight road of his'n which he run up the bluffs yonder. Built it for his Diamond K line, and now he charges the other lines toll so high it puts 'em out of business."

"That's his privilege. He built the road."

"It ain't his privilege to send out that gang of buzzards he calls a 'vigilance committee' to shoot up the Sullivan crew when they tried to build a road of their own."

Comanche John chewed this over silently for a while. He started to say something, but the Parson cut him off. "And that's not all. It's only a little part of what he's aimin' to do. Cutter runs this camp of Skinner's Point, as you've already seen. And he also rules the freight road from here to the gold camps. But that ain't enough for a vulture like him. No sir—now he's aimin' to rule the Missouri clear from here to St. Louis."

"I've heered some o' his Diamond K boats," John admitted. "But don't hold it too hard on the Cap'n if he should get a bit rough on his competition. It's been a habit with them boat outfits from time to time. I recall once, two or three years back—"

"Competition is fine. I think it's a healthy thing. But not when they start shootin' rival owners in the back, and then turnin' around to rob the same man's pore, innocent daughter of all she's got in the world."

This last was too much for Comanche John. He sank the run-over heels of his jackboots into the dust, and gave a violent hitch to his drooping gun belts. "Rob an innocent gal, did you say? Revener, is that gospel, or are you feedin' me the lump sugar?"

"It's the gospel." The Parson then explained in detail. There were three steamboat lines operating between Skinner's Point and St. Louis—the Diamond K, belonging to Captain Cutter; the Arrowhead, owned by young Ross MacLain; and, largest of the three, the Vallon, founded by Pierre Vallon. It was Pierre Vallon who had been murdered near the Arrowhead dock three weeks before.

"And you figger Cap'n Cutter is behind his killin'?" asked John.

"I do."

"Ain't sure I can hold with that opinion. What good would it do Cap'n Cutter to shoot this Vallon? It wouldn't put his line out o' business. That gal o' Vallon's inherits the spread, don't she? No, Revener, I think you're sufferin' from a case o' galloping delusions. So far, the Cap'n has been a friend o' mine."

The Parson snorted, "Then you trust him?"

"I didn't exactly say that." There was a squeak of saddle leather as Comanche John mounted his pony. "Nope—he sort o' saved my neck from bein' rope-stretched, so that makes him a friend o' the first water, but I ain't in the habit o' trustin' my friends."

"If you can't trust your friends, who do you trust?" grumbled the Parson, "nobody?"

"Me? Sure I trust somebody. I trust my enemies." Comanche John let the Parson stew over this for a while, then he beat his thigh and roared out a coarse laugh. The pinto started drifting along the street. "Whar's your church located, Revener?" John called over his shoulder.

"T'other side of the Sandbar Saloon."

"Mebby I'll drop in after a bit. We can drink whisky and sing a psalm together."

II

COMANCHE JOHN selected a cigar from a box of Cuban perfectos and sniffed it like a connoisseur. Cutter held out his candle cigar lighter, but John shook his head. He spat out his chew of blackstrap, ground the cigar to a leafy pulp between his palms, and selected a generous cheekful. The remainder he dumped into the pocket of his homespuns.

"If they's one thing I enjoy more'n another," he remarked, "it's a fine cee-gar."

"So I see," smiled Cutter. He lit his own cigar and puffed for a while. "So you're Comanche John," he mused, settling

back and tapping the floor with one boot toe.

"Yep, the gen-u-wine."

"I've been hearing about you for some time."

"I ain't surprised." John chawed. "They even made up a song about me. It's powerful pretty. Goes like this. He commenced to sing in a wavering, wolflike falsetto:

"Comanche John was born
In the state of Tennessee,
The son of humble mountain folk
Who lived in pover-tee;
Young John hit out for Kansas
At the age of twenty-three
To vote in the election
On the side of slaver-ee.

He wondered down to Texas
With a pal named Injun Ike—"

Cutter broke in and said, "I've already heard the ballad, I believe."

"Chances are you ain't heered the verse about when I robbed the coach at Pistol Rock. It was made up by a mule skinner over at Montana City. It goes—"

"Never mind." Cutter looked at John thoughtfully for a while. "You're fully aware that I saved you from hanging out there a few minutes ago."

"Yep! And I'm downright grateful."

"I don't doubt you deserved to hang."

"Thank-ee."

"By reputation you're a pretty fancy man with your navies."

"Waal—I've shot at bottles, here and there."

"I have a proposition for a man like you. I want you to lead a certain group for an evening—negligible risk, substantial consideration."

"Would you mind dealin' that hand over? Them big cyards flew by so fast I couldn't read the spots on 'em."

Cutter smiled. "All right—how'd you like an easy job for the heavy color?"

"Now, that's my language. Just what was you figgerin' to rob, Cap'n, a faro bank, a stage coach, or a steamboat?"

"Rob?" Cutter nodded. "Well, perhaps a person could call it robbery. If so, it's a steamboat."

Comanche John rubbed his palms jubilantly, "I've always hankered to rob me a steamboat. Think what a verse that would make for my song!"

"And we're going to sink the boat, too."

"Sink it! Is that really necessary!"

Cutter did not answer. He strode to a closet and lifted the lid of a trunk. It was filled with clothing popular with sailors and officers on river steamboats. He tossed John a pair of dungaree trousers, a blue shirt, and a stiff-billed cap. Comanche John noticed that the cap was marked by an Arrowhead insignia.

"Thought your line was the Diamond K."

"It is. And that cap is an Arrowhead. That's why you will wear it tomorrow night—when you direct the sinking of that Vallon boat."

"I'm beginnin' to catch on," John said, chawing slowly. He splattered Cutter's spotless floor with tobacco juice, and chawed some more. "Yep, I'm mighty quick in the head when it comes to thinkin'. Our boys dress up like Arrowhead men, we sink the Vallon boat, and then you sit back and let your two competitors battle right down to their last bottom. Why, that's smart! You'll be in position to rule the river from—"

Cutter broke in, "You can leave the long-range plans to me. Your job is to put that boat to the bottom. If you do, you'll be paid a thousand dollars. The boat you're to sink is Vallon's *White Cloud.* She'll take on some furs and then cross to Coalmine Point for buffalo hides. I expect her to get away from there about sundown. Anyway, you'll have plenty of time to cross the Horseshoe Bend and attack her when she runs close to the shore at the mouth of Assiniboine Coulee."

"Undoubtless I get a cut on the furs we take off her."

"You'll get your thousand dollars," Cutter snapped.

"Sorry I brung the matter up," John chawed, his voice resigned, but his eyes as cold as a winter's sky. "By the way, Cap'n, ain't this Vallon line owned by a gal? A Miss Lynne Vallon, daughter of old Pierre? And didn't I hear she was castin' sheep's eyes at Ross MacLlain, owner of Arrowhead?"

Cutter made an impatient gesture. "May I remind you of something? Yankee Bar would still like very much to get its hands

on you. I saved you from a rope this afternoon. I might not be quite so solicitous if anything went wrong. Do we understand each other?"

"Cap'n, we heap savvy each other from the headbox right down across the riffles."

"Good!" Cutter stood with a gesture which indicated the meeting was finished. "There'll be about fifteen men to help you. We should have more, but men you can trust are sometimes hard to find. I want you to get together with them tonight in the cabin of the warehouse. Be there at twelve o'clock or a little after."

TEN MINUTES LATER Comanche John clomped his dusty jackboots the length of the Parson's mission and sat heavily in the front pew.

"Parson," he stated, "I've always been proud of my strength of stomach, but I'm bound to admit that Cap'n Cutter is too much for my de-gestion."

The Parson made an I-told-you-so sound in his throat, and then listened while John outlined Cutter's plan.

"What do you aim to do about it?" he asked when John had finished.

"I ain't exactly decided. I'm tore this way and that. You see, I'm indebted to Cutter for savin' my life—and a debt's a debt, as the Injuns say. If it hadn't been for that I'd lean toward shootin' him. Though there's this way of lookin' at it, too—if I don't shoot him, that means I'm savin' his life, sort of, so it makes us even all over again."

"There'll be no bloodshed if I can help it," snapped Parson. "It's always the same thing whenever I run into you. It was that way at Lemhi, and it was that way at Eldorado."

"And it'll end by bein' that way here at Skinner's Point. It's the only way agin varmints like Cutter."

"Them which lives by the sword shall die by the sword," insisted the Parson.

"They's somethin' else the Good Book says, Revener. An eye-tooth for an eye-tooth, that's what."

"Just the same, I got me an idee. A man don't necessarily need guns if he uses his head."

John lolled back in the log pew and freshened the chaw of tobacco in his cheek. "Waal, don't feel hurt if I sort of keep my navys handy just in case."

That evening Comanche John insisted on visiting the jail. "Never yet seen a skookum-house that could hold me," he explained to Sheriff Kurdy, "so I sort of drop around and have a look whenever I get in a new camp."

The sheriff hee-hawed and whacked his leg, "Never seen a jail that could hold him, he says. Waal, you're lookin' at one right now. See them walls?—eighteen inches thick. And the bars!—They was hammered from steel left over when the *Memphis Gal* busted her boilers. I reckon maybe you're a foxy customer like the song about you says, but you couldn't bust this jail between now and doomsday. . . . Hey! What you doin' there?"

John lowered the loose plank he had lifted from the floor. "Just inspectin'. And about me bustin' this jail betwixt now and doomsday—I look upon that as a personal challenge."

"You do?"

"Yep. I aim to personally crack this prison before I leave the fine, upstandin' city of Skinner's Point."

When they were outside, the Parson complained, "That was the most foolish brag I ever heard. And what the thunder does any man want to go around inspectin' jails for?"

"P'fessional interest, Revener. I'm interested in jails just like you're interested in churches—I'm in and out of 'em so much. Now, about this Ross MacLain. You say he owns the Arrowhead line. You suppose we ought to drop around and visit that young bucko . . . after dark, of course?"

ROSS MACLAIN, owner of the Arrowhead steamboat line, was not usually a nervous young man, but tonight he was on edge. He'd been on edge frequently of late—ever since Pierre Vallon had been murdered.

Strange thing, that murder of Vallon. Shot in the back, and not for money, either, for there was gold in his pockets when they found him. And Vallon wasn't a man with many enemies.

Ross felt sorry for Pierre's daughter—Lynne. All alone in the world, running a steamboat line from a tough frontier

camp like Skinner's Point. Ross had been so sympathetic that he'd called on her every evening that week—each time staying a little later. This night he stayed so long that Mama Annie, Lynne's old nurse and self-appointed protector, had cast certain hints. It was eleven-thirty, Annie had pointed out, and a young man who stayed at a girl's home until such an hour certainly cared little for her reputation.

So Ross waited until Annie had stalked from the room, resisted an impulse to kiss the owner of the Vallon Line, pressed her hand instead, and started for the docks.

The *White Cloud* was tied up at the Vallon dock. Her boilers were being fired preparatory to leaving next morning. A couple hundred yards further along at his own dock lay the *Highland Mary,* a dark hulk no longer fit for the bars and cross-currents of the "Wild Mizzouree." Ross had fixed up a suite of cabins in her and lived there in considerable luxury.

He climbed the short plank to her deck. A shadow emerged and moved toward him.

"Jocko?"

"So, M'zhu Ross."

Jocko was a gargantuan French-Indian-mulatto whom Ross had rescued from the ship of a Caribbean slave smuggler south of New Orleans three years before. As this was the only kindness he had ever received, Jocko had since followed him with the devotion of a spaniel.

Ross walked to his quarters with Jocko half a step in the lead. There the big mulatto opened the door and stood at attention as he had seen soldiers do.

The stateroom which Ross entered was furnished as befitted the bachelor owner of a half-million-dollar steamboat line. He bid Jocko goodnight, closed the door, and stretched out in his favorite armchair. He smoked a pipeful and went to bed.

It seemed he had been asleep scarcely a minute when he was aroused by the sound of Jocko's voice, crying out in a wild mixture of English, French and heaven only knew what. Then another voice, bellowing whole mouthfuls of oaths.

Ross located his pistol and ran on deck. He drew up with surprise on seeing the huge Jocko on hands and knees rising groggily from the floor. Standing back a few steps and partly hidden in the shadows was a heavy booted fellow with tangled black whiskers.

"Thar's a lesson I learnt from the Arapahoes," the black-whiskered one was saying. "Look for it next time you come for somebody with a knife."

Ross advanced quietly on bare feet. "Drop your gun, stranger," he commanded.

"Which one?" There was a laugh in the bewhiskered man's voice. "The one I got on you, or the one I got on your man, yonder?"

It was true. The whiskered one was holding a navy pistol in each hand. And then, to make his situation more precarious, another man moved in the shadow right by his elbow.

"Don't jump like that, MacLain," chuckled black-whiskers, "the Parson, yonder, is right peaceful."

A gray man with a thin, beaked face now stepped into the moonlight.

"Why, it's the missionary from over town!" Ross exclaimed.

"The same!" answered the Parson. "And yonder fellow is a more or less heathenish friend o' mine. I mostly endure his nee-ferious habits and put some of 'em to the cause of Christian betterment. His handle is Comanche John."

"Seems like I've heard of you—"

"Yep, it's likely you have." John spat across the deck for emphasis. "They even made up a hymn about me. Every mule-skinner and bullwhacker betwixt here and Salt Lake is singin' it. Right pretty. Goes like this:

Comanche John rode to I-dee-ho
In the year of 'Sixty-two
With a pal named Whisky Anderson
And one called Jake-the—"

"Never mind," yowled the Parson. "We got more important things than that song. Where's your sleepin' room, MacLain?"

ROSS took them inside and listened while John told of his meeting with Captain Cutter. He was grim when the story was finished.

"The *White Cloud* leaves tomorrow about daylight. I think they plan on stopping at Coalmine Point to take on buffalo hides. I don't imagine they'll get away from there before sundown. They'll take

it easy through the night because the pilot will want to run the narrows by daylight. I guess that would put them opposite Assiniboine Bar about midnight." He stood up. "I'd better warn Lynne tonight."

John snorted, "And let Cutter and his gang slip away? We got to catch 'em with the evidence or Cutter will cook up some new deviltry. Say nothin' to the gal, that's my counsel. Let Cutter go ahead and get his neck in the noose. All we need do is round up twelve of fifteen men we can trust and hide 'em in the brush back of Assiniboine Coulee. When Cutter and his boys are busy, waltz in on 'em."

"Ought to be easy as 'rithmatic to a school-ma'am," agreed the Parson.

Ross thought it over for a while and agreed. They worked out a few details of the plan, then he called, "Paytee!"

"And who, pray, is Paytee?" asked John.

"A Polynesian boy who cooks for me."

Paytee was short, sleek and obsequious, though not so young as the word "boy" would indicate. He glided in after only a few seconds' wait.

"You dress in a hurry!" said Ross.

"I hear big fight. Then I know you have company. So . . ."

"Fine! Stir up some coffee. And bring us a bottle of that sherry I got in St. Louis. . . ."

Comanche John and the Parson stayed for half an hour. Ross followed them to the plank, and a few minutes later, he left also. He wanted to look up some trusted men for the next evening's business. The boat was quiet. Perhaps an hour passed — then there came a soft, gurgling sound like something being lowered in the water. Jocko, who kept watch, made no move to investigate. Such sounds were common in moving water, at night. He had no reason to suspect that the soft gurgle had come from the gentle descent of the Polynesian, Paytee, sliding from the far side of the boat.

Paytee stroked easily, in a frog-fashion, without lifting hands or feet from the water. He let the current sweep him downstream for a hundred yards, then he turned sharply and struck out for shore with a swift crawl-stroke. Once ashore he slid quickly into the shadow of a cottonwood grove and followed a round-about route which took him to the stairway of Captain Cutter's apartment in the town.

Paytee didn't stay long in the apartment. In five minutes he sneaked back down the stairs and ran to the river upstream from the boat. Jocko was still standing near the plank when he floated down and pulled himself up the side. The entire trip had not consumed twenty-five minutes.

Back in the apartment, Captain Cutter sat on the edge of his bed, his handsome face more than usually grim. He bit an end from one of his long cigars with a grimace that indicated his vexation. He puffed thoughtfully, and the frown was replaced by a gloating smile. He snapped his fingers in a gesture which indicated he knew quite well what his course would be.

III

THE STEAMBOAT *White Cloud* got under way about mid-morning and headed across the river to Coalmine Point for its buffalo hides. She lay there all afternoon, her tall chimneys trailing a haze of smoke. Toward evening the haze thickened and the chimneys rolled billowing black. The *White Cloud* put on steam and nosed her way into the current.

"About time for me to heave-ho," remarked John to the Parson. "I got to get Cap'n Cutter's boys together if we're to cut across the horseshoe bend in time to catch that craft at Assiniboine. But first off, I think I'll get me some eatin' tobacco."

John and the Parson stepped from the store to ram against twin guns held in the hands of Sheriff Kurdy.

"Skinner's Point must be a rough camp," John drawled innocently. "Imagine a sheriff havin' to carry his pistols on the ends of his arms instead of in his holsters—"

"You're under arrest."

"Me!" John seemed scandalized. He edged over toward the door of a harness shop. "Reckon I must have mistook what you—"

"Stand back from thar!" roared Kurdy. "Don't get the idea I wouldn't just hanker pullin' these triggers!"

Two deputies appeared from hiding places behind the store. They, like the

sheriff, were taking no chances. Their guns were drawn. One of them lifted John's two navies.

"Better look under his coat," Kurdy said. "He had a hide-out derringer there yesterday."

"None there today." The deputy turned his attention to the Parson. "And this old pelican don't carry armaments at all. Only thing he's armed with is Scripture."

"This is an outrage!" squawked the parson.

"I'll say it's an outrage," John roared in agreement. "Me, one of the most outstandin' and famous men in the whole Nor'west—"

"Mebby," said Kurdy with a smug smile, "but in an hour or two you will be *was* famous, if you understand what I'm drivin' at."

"And what crime have I done?"

"Just because you ain't committed a crime yet don't mean you can't be hung. You intended to, and intention is accessory after the act, as it says in the revised statutes."

John chawed and squinted at the sheriff, "It also says in them stat-choots o' you'rn that a prisoner, when accosted by an officer of the law, must be informed by said officer, to-wit—the charge and reason for said incarceration. Ain't that Hoyle, Parson?"

"Right!" cackled the Parson.

"We don't go that far into Hoyle or Blackstone or them old sidewheelers here in Skinner's Point. But you'll be hung legal. Judge Doolin will see to that." Kurdy bowed with mock solemnity, "Would you please inspect our jail, Mr. Comanche John? Seems like I overheard a brag you made about it not bein' able to hold you."

THE jail was a good one. The bars were strap metal, bolted to thick, cottonwood logs. The door was heavy, whipsawed plank reinforced with strips of steel, and it was secured on the outside by a solid beam and a padlock.

Kurdy snapped that padlock and looked inside at John and the Parson with a satisfied smirk. "Still think you can bust her?"

"Guess I talked out of tune," John admitted contritely.

Kurdy chortled for a while, and then left to brag about his arrest at some of the barrooms.

"Why'd you tell him you could break this jail?" asked the Parson. "A fat chance we got now. He's got a double guard posted."

"Don't rile me, Revener. If it weren't for your pious plan to run a crusade down the main street of this mangy river town, I wouldn't even be in this jail. I'd be out, earnin' an honorable living robbin' stagecoaches."

The Parson waved a knuckly old finger under John's nose, "You'll come to no good end, breakin' the laws of the land and braggin' about it."

John hee-hawed and beat dust from the leg of his homespun pants. "Revener, I hate to remind you, but if I don't fulfill my brag and get us out of this cage, we'll both come to that 'no good end' you mentioned. Yep, we'll both do our final quadrille at the end of a rope."

The gray part of evening was settling in. One of the deputies lit a candle in the jail office. Its yellow flame cast a few weak rays through the barred opening in the cell door. The Parson sat on the edge of a bunk, head in hands, thinking. For a space of fifteen minutes, neither he nor Comanche John spoke. Out in the office a slap-slap of cards indicated that the deputy was playing solitaire. A freight wagon creaked past and the skinner sang in a sad voice. The words made John sit up very straight.

"Glory be, Revener," he chortled, "d'ye hear the hymn that mule-skinner is singin'?"

The skinner's voice became louder as his wagon creaked along the rutted street.

"Comanche John came to I-dee-ho
In the year of 'Sixty-two
With a pal named Whisky Anderson
And one called Jake-the-Shoe
Three straighter shootin' highwaymen
The Nor'west never knew
Oh, listen to my stor-e-e-e
I'll tell ye what they do:

They rode to Orofino
On the old Snake River trail,
They robbed the coach at Pistol Rock
And stopped the western mail,

But Jake got drunk in Lewiston
And ended up in jail
And they hung him to a cottonwood
'Fore John could go his bail."

THE MULE-SKINNER stopped singing and commenced hurling imprecations at his beasts, and the Parson remarked, "A fitting conclusion!"

"Imagine, tryin' to hold me in jail," John muttered. *"Me,* the hero of every mule-skinner from Salt Lake to Bignose."

The minutes stretched out. There seemed to be an unusual amount of activity out in the street. "Maybe they're riggin' up to hang us," remarked John, trying to see the street from the tiny window. "What's going on in this camp, anyhow?" he asked the guard.

"Posse," came back the reply.

"Who for?"

"For your pards. For the men who hired you to come here."

"Hired me! Deal that one over."

"Don't act innocent. Cap'n Cutter found out the plans that you and your preacher pal made with Ross MacLain to rob and sink that Vallon steamboat up by Medicine Grove, and—"

"By Medicine Grove!" cackled the Parson.

"Sit down, Revener. Ain't you never heard it's impolite to interrupt folks?" He apologized to the guard. "Don't pay heed to my pard, here. You know how these old Bible-shoutin' buzzards be. Always thinks he's at camp meetin'. Next thing, he'll get the shakes. What was it you was about to say? I'm sort of curious to find out how much of our plans he had figured."

"Might as well," said the guard, tossing down his deck. "You'll be hung in another hour, anyhow."

"Sure," John agreed. "We'll be lifeless as salt mackerel. Now where did you say this steamboat-sinkin' was to take place?"

"Medicine Grove. Cap'n Cutter was certain you and your men would be waitin' for her there. After the job was done you planned to scatter and meet up again at Assiniboine."

"Say, ain't he the smart one!"

"None smarter! But wait 'till you hear what he aims to do. First, the vigilance riders head off the boat. Then he sends a posse to surround Assiniboine. So you see, he has your bunch, MacLain and all. Has 'em both ways. If he's too late to head 'em off at Medicine Grove, he'll round 'em up at Assiniboine!"

"Whipsawed! Why, that's purty! D'ye hear that, Revener? D'ye hear how smart the Cap'n is?"

"Medicine Grove!" muttered the Parson.

John whispered, "Sure, the Cap'n will sink her there hisself, then he'll ride on and nab Ross and his boys at Assiniboine like sittin' ducks. It's slick as beaver mud."

"What'll we do?" wailed the Parson.

John did not answer. He slouched there, chawing, by the cell door, but his eyes, when the candlelight struck them, were shrewd and calculating.

The posse was still gathered in the street. There were impatient movements of hoofs, repressed excitement in the voices of the men. Soon they galloped away. The town seemed deserted for a while, then the squeak of fiddles and the twang of banjos made themselves heard from the nearby hurdy-gurdy houses, men sang, and talked and walked the sidewalks—Skinner's Point had returned to normal.

By the slap-slap of cards in the office they knew that the guard still played solitaire. The other guard loitered near the wall outside.

"Don't worry," said Comanche John to the Parson. "A Gypsy gal in Frisco told my fortune one time and said I was goin' to die in bed—betwixt them white things quality folks sleeps in."

"Sheets?"

"Yep. And with a goosehair pillow beneath my head!"

"T'ain't bein' hung which worries me," the Parson moaned. "I keep thinkin' about poor Ross MacLain and that Vallon gal. Them dependin' on us, and us in jail."

John stood and walked tip-toe to peer from the window. The guard still lurked around outside. John cursed and paced the cell.

"Reckon I'll have to chance it," he muttered.

"Chance what?"

"Not so loud, you idjit! You ain't preachin' a sermon."

"Chance what?" the Parson whispered.

"Chance escapin'."

The Revener hopped up on his spindly old legs. "You got some way of gettin' out of here?"

John shuffled across the floor, seeming to feel for something with his heavy, horsehide jackboots. One plank appeared to interest him, for, after squeaking up and down on it a few times, he bent over, lifted it, and felt beneath. It was the same plank he had lifted when "inspecting" the jail the day before. When he stood, a stray beam of light reflected from the blued barrel of a big-bore Texas derringer.

"Well, glory be!" gasped the Revener.

IV

COMANCHE JOHN swaggered around the cell a few times. "Yep! This ought to be a lesson to you, Revener. You should never question my actions. I had me a reason for inspectin' this here cage last night. It's my regular policy to slip a gun inside the jail whenever I visit a doubtful camp. Shucks, I got me derringers hid under floors and inside mattresses and betwixt logs of jails from Yuba City to Canady. Cheap little cannons, these, but load 'em with buck and they're mean potent at squaw's range." John chuckled and beat the leg of his homespuns. "Oh, I'm the smart one when it comes to thinkin'."

John suddenly seized the Revener, shook him like a bulldog shaking a poodle, and stamped his jackboots while he roared, "Gimme that poke, gol dang ye! Revener, that thar gold is half mine!"

The Parson protested and gasped for breath. "Lemme alone!" he wailed, perhaps thinking John had gone insane. By that time the guard had thrown down his cards and was trying to see inside.

"Hey, cut out that racket—"

"It's gold, and it's half mine," John panted. He turned to the guard for judgment. "He found a poke o' gold under the pallet, yonder. It's half and half, ain't it, deppity?"

The second guard shouted from outside, "What's the matter in there, Hank?"

"Nothing!" Hank hastened to assure him. He was itching to get his hands on the gold. "Stand by yonder wall!" he commanded.

John and the Parson obeyed. The deputy then unbolted the door and entered, gun in hand. "Such property becomes confiscated by the law. Where is this dust?"

"Loaded in these two bar'ls," John drawled, leveling his double-derringer. "An ounce in each of 'em, and if you make one wrong move, you'll take possession right betwixt the eyes!"

The deputy stood there, jaw drooping. His fingers slowly relaxed, and the gun he was holding clomped to the floor.

"Get it, Parson," said John. "And get the one on his hip, too."

"What's a goin' on in thar, Hank?" demanded the outside deputy, trying to see through the window.

John jiggled his derringer significantly, "Come on—tell the man."

"N-nothing!" answered Hank. "Just a little argument I had to settle."

Satisfied, the guard shuffled away. The Parson breathed deeply and paused with Hank's second pistol, undecided what he should do with it. He ended by sticking it in the band of his pants.

"Revener!" John chuckled, "now you look mighty nigh human."

"Let's get ourselves out of here," squawked the Parson in his parrot voice.

John clapped his hand over the Parson's mouth, but it was too late. The guard had overheard. They could hear him mutter something and start toward the jail door. John waited, a navy in one hand and the derringer in the other, but the guard decided not to go in.

After a few seconds, John motioned for the Parson to follow him from the cell. He turned to bolt the door. For a second they were visible from the office window. John sensed a movement outside and flung the Parson flat against the wall just as the guard fired. The air was filled with stinging fragments of glass. Almost simultaneously, John's navy roared—but he did not aim at the window. The bullet cut the candle wick.

Everything was flickering darkness. They waited. Slowly, a long rectangle of light emerged to mark the location of the open door, and two smaller rectangles, the windows. Everything seemed quiet. John moved out the front door and the Parson followed him.

By this time, both guards were shouting for help. Attracted by their cries,

men ran from several doorways. A big, florid fellow wearing a pearl-gray stovepipe hat was bellowing with the volume of a Fourth-of-July orator and waving his arms.

"It's over at the jail. What are you waiting for? It's those two road agents, gentlemen! Over there in a hurry, I say, and check that escape!"

"Lead the way, Judge," chuckled a mule-skinner. "Every army needs a general, I reckon, and you're the ranking officer now that lord-high Cap'n Cutter has gone."

Others in the crowd did not share the mule-skinner's caution. They ran around the corner of the saloon with guns drawn. The guard now made himself heard, his voice coming from behind a rubbish pile midway between the jail and the street.

"They're out front somewheres. Fan out a little and don't get too close. That black-whiskered gent is a killer from away back."

"Nonsense!" the Judge boomed from a hiding place he had chosen behind a rain barrel. "Why exercise caution at a moment like this? Close in, I say. Close in, men, and take them dead or alive!"

The night was filled with shadowy forms, moving slowly to surround the jail. John, pulling the Parson after him, moved along in the shadow of the building until he was only a few steps from the rubbish pile where the guard was hiding.

"Drop yore pistols, deppity," he grinned.

THE DEPUTY, who had thought John was making his escape in the other direction, muttered something and obeyed. John hopped over the rubbish heap, took one of the deputy's pistols for himself and tossed the other to the Parson.

"Thar," he said with evident satisfaction, slapping his weighted holsters, "reckon that balances me up proper again. Come along, Revener."

They edged on tip-toe past some buildings until they were far from the jail and then hurried downhill to the riverfront. "What's the idee?" the Parson panted after they had covered fifty yards or so. "We got to find hosses, ain't we—"

"Hosses, nothin'! You can't follow the river bluffs on horseback. Nope, I noticed one of them Diamond K boats pullin' up from downriver this evenin', and unless she lost her head o' steam quicker'n I anticipate, you and me, we're goin' to ride down the Mizzouri in style."

It was the *Sioux Scout* just in from St. Louis. She had finished unloading and all except a couple of her crew were heading up the street toward the town's houses of pleasure. While John and the Parson watched, these two left the boat and went through the wide door of a warehouse where a lamp was burning.

John motioned for the Parson to follow him aboard the boat. They made a swing around the deck, but it was deserted. "Gimme a hand, Parson. These hawsers are pulled plenty tight."

The Parson helped him loose the hawsers. For a while the boat drifted slowly. Then her stern swung outward in a gentle arc, the current caught her, and she was swept swiftly toward midstream. It all happened so quickly that no one on the docks noticed what had happened until the *Sioux Scout* had just about disappeared into the darkness.

"Waal, Revener," Comanche John grinned, "I don't reckon it's every day a man steals himself a steamboat! That's gettin' way up in the higher reaches o' banditry. Think what a verse this'll make for the song they're singin' about me.

'Comanche John stole a river boat,
A sternwheel Diamond K,
A braver piece o'—"

"Hush up! They's somebody below!"

They listened. A man was bellowing down in the engine room. "I tell you they've cut this craft loose! I'm goin' topside and see what's got into their fool heads. Hire a gang o' punkin-rollers for crew, and what do you get? . . ."

And he kept cursing and bellowing as his heavy boots clomped up the boiler hatch. He stood on deck and looked around—a soot-encrusted man clad only in boots, pants and a boatman's cap.

"Who are *you?*" he demanded on seeing John.

"Comanche John's the handle."

John waited for the engineer to be confounded by the announcement, but the man merely looked blank.

"Ain't you never heered o' me? They sure have some iggorant men on this river!

Waal, I'll bet gold to greenbacks you'll hear about me after tonight—"

"What you doin' on this craft?" the engineer finally got around to bellow. "Where's the Cap'n? Git out of my way, you mule-skinner—"

The engineer started to push past, but something about John's attitude caused him to change his mind.

"I'm master o' this craft now," John told him, "and I want some steam. Revener, you git yonder to the pilot house and take the wheel."

John clomped to the boiler room behind the engineer and looked around. "Git some pitch-pine in that furnace," he shouted at a surprised Negro lad whose task it was to stoke the boilers. "Go on, git—"

"You can't put in more wood!" objected the engineer.

"Why?"

"Look at the steam gauge. That left boiler ain't so good. Five more pounds and you'll blow her head clean off—"

"Don't tell me what I can do. I'm cap'n o' this here steamboat now, and I want some speed out of her. Weight that safety valve. Throw on more wood. Git the paddlewheel to turnin'. We got to catch the *White Cloud* before she gets out o' the bluffs!"

Under the threat of John's pistols, an anvil was hung on the safety valve. The Negro boy heaved in pitch-pine. John seated himself on the bottom step of the hatch and chawed placidly.

The *Sioux Scout* was a new boat, designed to battle the Missouri's swift current, and tonight, with that current at her stern, she went booming along at a clip few riverboats could equal.

For several miles after leaving Skinner's Point the channel was deep and quite regular. By simply keeping the craft to the middle of the stream, the Parson had no difficulty. Then the river made a slow swing to the right toward a spot known to rivermen as Smoke Creek Crossing. The channel here was constantly shifting. Where it lay deep and safe one week, it might be choked with sand the next. As a result, more timorous pilots were in the habit of sending a skiff ahead to sound passage.

The Parson, however, slowed not a turn of the paddlewheel. He swung his churning craft into the crossing with all the daring which could be derived from complete ignorance. So, while any pilot, drunk or sober, knew that the most likely course hugged the south bank, the Parson steered down the middle. All the while the engineer waved his arms from the engine-room hatch and screamed: "Hug the bank! Hug bank to starboard."

"Which side's that?" asked the Parson.

But John elbowed the engineer out of his way. "Don't worry your head about our pilot, yonder. He's got Providence on his side, I reckon." Then he roared up to the pilot house, "Let her have both bar'ls, Parson!"

The boat was of shallow draft. In addition, she had just been relieved of her cargo, and hence she rode high in the water. Perhaps this was her salvation, for she skimmed the treacherous bars of the crossing and churned through to the deeper waters beyond.

V

THE RIVER followed a sharp cleft between dark clay bluffs. It was here they hoped to overtake the *White Cloud,* but mile after mile slipped away and the river only a strip of darkness ahead. Gradually the bluffs fell away and they came to a wild badlands country of barren, pointed hills.

The river here was wider, its current diminished, and it kept breaking into separate channels with narrow, cottonwood-covered islands between. The Parson mumbled a prayer and steered among them.

"Parson! You aim a steamboat like I aim a pistol ball!" roared John.

But the Parson did not answer. His jaw was set, chin whiskers bristling, and his eyes cut the darkness to a spot a couple of miles distant where a string of lights wavered along the water's edge. After a few seconds, John spotted it, too.

"Blast ye, Parson, that's it They've stopped the *White Cloud* already, but I reckon we'll be there in time to raise a ruckus." He bellowed more orders down to the engineer, "Put on steam! I've seen more hiss in a tea kettle. And don't give me none o' yore lip or I'll use ye for pistol practice."

The river was wide—shallow. Even the

Parson's unpracticed eye could detect the moonlit riffles and streaks of dead water where the shoals lay. Areas of cattails and first-year willows occupied the crests of the larger bars and mudbanks.

The farther he steered, the more apparent it became that the real channel lay against the south bank. The *White Cloud* was over there, and in order to reach her he would need to do one of two things—either continue downstream until he reached the main channel, or risk crossing the wide shallows.

The Parson steered on for a while, praying for some favorable development. He watched hopefully as some of the mudflats dwindled, but, outweighing this favorable sign, a long, narrow island came into view, cutting the river in half.

Appearance of the island made the Parson realize his moment for decision had come. With an abrupt heave on the wheel he brought the craft around cross-current, and in another thirty seconds she was cutting through quiet, shoal water.

There was little to spare. Twice the bottom of the long boat ground against sandbars, but in both cases her momentum carried her over. After what seemed to be a long time, the head of the island crept past and they slid into the deep water of the south channel.

"Glory be!" marveled John. "Providence is shore with ye tonight. And thar's the *White Cloud* yonder, hung up on a sandbar just so we can catch her."

The *White Cloud* lay cross-stream and down two hundred yards. The bright light of her furnace doors was visible, and her ports were all aglow. The moonlight glistened from her paddlewheel as it churned fruitlessly against the sandbar.

The Parson rang bells, and the paddle of the *Sioux Scout* was cut. He shouted down: "John, I believe that's Cutter's men ridin' toward her now."

"Where? I can't see 'em."

"Just splashin' over from ashore."

John clomped to the hurricane deck for a view. Sure enough—there was a gang of men, riding through the shallow water which separated the *White Cloud* from shore. He chuckled and beat on his pants leg.

"What'll we do?" the Parson wailed.

"Do? Why, Revener, this here is pretty. It's beautiful. We couldn't have ast for nothin' better. Wheel cross-stream a bit, gee-haw her around, and lay her betwixt the *White Cloud* and the bank. If our wave don't dislodge that boat, you can call me a Blackfoot and shoot me dead."

"But how about us?"

"What you worryin' about? It ain't *your* boat, is it?"

The Parson rang for the paddles and aimed the craft as Comanche John had directed, wheeling her so sharply that one side of the hull ground against the gravel of the river bottom.

She loomed unexpectedly to Cutter's men who had been intent on the *White Cloud*. Someone shouted an alarm. They tried to bring their horses around, fighting current and sand. A couple splashed on toward the *White Cloud;* the others headed for shore. It was a mix-up of men and horses.

"Yip-e-e!" shouted John. "Clear out of the way, you hossback pirates, hyar we come."

The Parson had now straightened the boat out, and she was running full blast with the rapid current. The captain of the *White Cloud,* still not understanding the madman's scene which had developed, was shouting warnings through his megaphone. But the Parson paid no heed. He kept the boat roaring toward the shallow stretch of muddied river which separated the *White Cloud* from shore—water still filled with plunging horses, terrified riders. . . .

The prow of the Parson's boat shot past the stern of the *White Cloud*. They came abreast. For a second it seemed that, miraculously, the *Sioux Scout* would skim over the sandbar, but then, with a roar and a splinter of timbers, she plowed herself deep and came to a shuddering stop.

COMANCHE JOHN picked himself up from the deck in time to see the great swell of water carry the churning *White Cloud* up with momentary buoyancy. She slid forward half her length on the crest of it, sank again, lower than before, her paddlewheels flinging mud, and then, with a brave effort, freed herself and sped on downstream.

"Come on, Parson! Let's get ourselves out of here before them varmints o' Cut-

ter's decide to put us on an entertainment."

The Parson half-climbed, half-fell from the pilot house. "Where's the *White Cloud?*" he asked.

"Gone, Revener." Then John stopped and cursed. The *White Cloud* had eased off a couple hundred yards away and was evidently getting ready to drop anchor.

"Git goin'," John shouted. When he realized they couldn't hear him, he drew one of his pistols and commenced firing. These bullets must have carried his message, for the boat lost no time getting out of range.

But by now the forces of Captain Cutter rallied near shore. "That's my boat!" Cutter was shouting. "That's the *Sioux Scout.* I heard Comanche John up there. Board that boat, damn you! Don't let those men get away."

Comanche John and the Parson leaped from the hurricane deck, intending to escape ashore. The Parson threw one leg over the rail, but John stopped him. "We'll have to get aft!"

"Hold on," yipped the Parson. "They're comin' from that end, too."

One of Cutter's "vigilantes" caught sight of them and cut loose with his pistol. The lead thudded against timbers. Comanche John's right-hand pistol roared an answer. The vigilante crumpled, and his plunging horse dragged him away, his foot hanging in the stirrup.

"One!" said John. "How many more we got to go, Parson?"

"Plenty. We can't stay here. We can't fight an army. Let's get through the cabins and drop to the water on t'other side. They won't likely—"

"Go ahead and save yore skin, Revener," John grinned, teeth flashing white amidst his tangled black whiskers. "You're a man o' peace. But I ain't. I'm a fightin' man, and I wouldn't miss this here ruckus for all the Bibles in Boston."

"Then I won't run out either!" the Parson announced. "I don't reckon it's too un-Christian to fight a gang o' varmints." He jerked a pistol from the band of his pants and waved it around in his vulture-claw hands. "I reckon we'll get killed doin' this, but we can die happy knowin' it's been in a good cause."

"Ho-ho!" roared Comanche John, doing some polka steps in his heavy jackboots. "You may aim on gettin' killed, but not me. Don't forget what that Gypsy told me about passin' away rich and respected, a country squire betwixt snow-white sheets."

VI

CUTTER and his men fanned out and advanced in the deep shadow cast by the decks. John's eyes became hard as he weaved from side to side trying to pick out a subject for his marksmanship. One of Cutter's men blazed away at the boat. Like an echo, John's right-hand navy barked. There was a cry, and they could hear a horse splashing off through the water.

They waited. "Wish they'd hurry up about it," complained John. "Seems to be takin' 'em an unnatural long time."

The Parson thought the same. Several men were riding around, shouting, cursing, but they were making no attempt to come aboard. John raised up to get a view of the river over the bow of the boat. He caught sight of shadowy forms moving quietly around to the other side of the boat.

"Revener, they're aimin' on takin' us from behind."

Nearby were stairs leading up to the hurricane deck. They were in shadow, but strong moonlight covered the deck. A lookout on the shore raised a cry and cut loose with a Henry rifle. Comanche John flung himself face foremost to the hurricane deck as the bullet ripped splinters.

The Parson climbed up and stood there in full sight. He didn't seem to know where the bullets were coming from. John dragged him to the deck. There, in the partial shadow of the rail, they were momentarily safe.

The hurricane deck extended three-fourths the length of the boat. It was unobstructed except for the small texas, the pilot house, and two smokestacks. Its boards were scrubbed white so the moonlight reflected as from snow.

"What we waitin' for?" asked the Parson.

"Can't you see? There's a man, yonder, with a Henry rifle. If we cross over to the texas, it'll have to be on the lope. Ready?"

"I ain't backed up yet, have I?"

John ran for it, with the Parson loping behind. The Henry rifle whanged, encouraging them to speed. Once inside the texas they were protected, and they had an unobstructed view of the deck, but there was no escape except above to the pilot house, and from the pilot house there was no escape at all.

"Trapped here like two rats!" fumed the Parson accusingly.

But John seemed unworried. "Mebby, but these two rats are the kind which spit right in the trapper's eye."

THE SHOUTING had died. In its place came only a murmur of voices. Now and then a horse splashed. An almost imperceptible vibration of the boat told them that men were climbing aboard and moving along the deck. Comanche John tried to keep watch of both sides of the texas at once. The Parson, who had taken time to poke through the captain's stateroom, came out with a nickel-plated sawed-off shotgun, a patent powder-horn and cap-box, and a pouch of buckshot.

"Parson, that's just the gun for a marksman like you. I was a mite worried before, but I ain't now—"

"Listen!"

Someone had crawled onto the hurricane and was now wriggling across, trying to keep in the shadow of the smokestack. The Parson raised his shotgun, but John held him back.

"Wait, thar, Parson. There's somethin' unusual about that lad."

Suddenly the man hopped to his feet and ran toward the texas at a hunched-over gallop. Two or three guns sent out streaks of fire from the edge of the deck. John flung open the door and the fellow came in. It was the Negro boy who had been firing the boilers.

He pointed and rolled the whites of his eyes, "Dey was a-goin' to wreak vengeance on me. Cap'n Cutter, he was goin' to carve on me wit his knife. Said I helped you out. I said 'no,' dat you'd kilt me if I'd of crossed you. He cussed and said I was a run-away nigger, but dat ain't true. De gov'mint man said I was freed. He say all us niggers was free men now dat de Nawth had won de wah."

"Don't look like none of us was free, what with that Cutter and his gang on every side," John said sourly. He wasn't an Abolitionist like the Parson, and the thought of a freed slave was too much for his digestion. But in spite of that he sympathized with the boy.

He said, "Don't worry about him carvin' you. Here, take this Texas derringer. Each o' them bar'ls is loaded with an ounce of buck, so you won't have to shoot too accurate. Just wait 'til they get inside tobacco-juice distance and whang away."

The Parson muttered something and let fly with his sawed-off. That seemed to be the spark that set off the fireworks. A dozen guns roared out. The glass of windows splintered and tinkled to the floor while stinging fragments of it filled the air.

The Parson blasted with the second barrel and then fumbled around trying to reload in the dark.

"Steady, Parson," said John, "They're only tryin' to get us to empty our weppings."

"Don't reckon that critter wants any more weppings emptied at him," the Parson responded.

John chuckled and let fly with a spurt of tobacco juice, "Parson, if you'd took to shootin' ruther than Bible shoutin', you might have ended up a real credit to the Nor'west."

"Hush up!" hissed the Parson.

He had heard something suspicious. A second later he spied a shadow slipping along the deck, keeping within the shadow cast by one of the chimneys. The Parson leveled his sawed-off.

"Save it," grunted John. "He's only a decoy."

The boy pulled John's sleeve, "Please, Mist' John. I heered somethin' way back in de texas, yondah. You don't suppose—"

"Maybe it was witches," John grinned.

"Nawsir, it warn't no witches. Laws, ain't any old witch make de floor squeak in walkin'. These was men, and I heered 'em."

They listened. Indeed, something was squeaking at the far end of the texas. Soon after, the squeaking sound was replaced by the sharp ripping of wood.

"They're comin' up through the floor!" John roared.

He started down the cross-hall. Some-

body shot, but it was dark and the bullets missed. John set himself, a navy in each hand. He filled the darkness with flame and streaking lead. For a few seconds the attackers tried to make a stand of it, then they rolled back, falling over each other in the forward door.

It was a diversion—all that Cutter needed. From the other direction, his men came swarming across the deck. John could get rapid, moonlit flashes of their moving forms from the windows of the texas.

"Keep away from that door, Andy, you fool!" a coarse voice bellowed just outside.

But "Andy" paid no heed. He rushed on, flung open the door, poked a gun inside and fired blindly. The firing was cut off suddenly as he met the lead from Comanche John's left-hand navy.

"Yip-ee!" roared John. "This is the life for me. Come on, you sea-goin' civet cats, I still got bullets for a six of ye!"

"John? Is that you?" It was the Parson. He sounded delirious. "Where are we? What's goin' on?"

THE PARSON staggered to his feet. He saw the door and went toward it. John shoved him away just in time. A bullet whipped through into the far wall. The Parson tried to stay erect on his wobbly old legs, but John had not pushed him gently, and he backpedaled to collapse against a far wall.

"Whar's my shotgun?" he moaned, feeling around the floor. "John, you help me find my shotgun so's I can shoot the buzzards."

"Lay low, Parson, I'm cleanin' 'em out satisfactory."

"Yes-sah!" exclaimed the Negro lad. "Mist' John is sho-nuff potent with the pistols."

It suddenly became silent. Everyone was lying low. The deck seemed to be deserted. John stood there, reloading the empty cylinders of his navies—a slow job in the dark. He could hear the Parson muttering as he felt along the floor for his sawed-off.

Footsteps — overhead. On the texas roof. He listened for a minute or so, then they hurried away.

Cutter's voice, "Get down Do you want to get half a steel hoop through your skull? I've lost too many men already."

"Half a hoop?" John muttered. "What the thunder? Say, let's get out of here. Sounds like they're set a keg o' powder on the roof."

But as he spoke the explosion hit them. The concussion of it cracked the texas wide open. Its front and part of one side was flung across the deck. The air was blinding with smoke, and burning powder pellets, and wood fragments. John was on his knees amid the wreckage. He called the Parson's name, but there was no answer. He felt his way over fallen timbers to the forward end of the texas. The pilot house was still intact. He saw the ladder and made it up there to escape Cutter's men who were coming from every direction. The pilot house door was open. He went inside. One of his guns was down below—the other only had a couple of shots left in it. He fumbled with it in the dark.

"Hank?" It was Captain Cutter's voice.

Cutter seemed to recognize Comanche John the same moment he spoke. It was too close for pistols. They grappled. It was an even balance of weight and strength. They plunged back and forth in the tiny room.

Cutter suddenly released his grip and spun away. He was familiar with the layout of the pilot house, and John wasn't. He ducked beneath the desk and came up on the other side. John glimpsed the glimmer of pistol steel in his hand. He reached for his navy, but the holster was empty. The gun had been lost somewhere in the dark.

He flung himself against the wall as the bullet whisked by. He dove for the floor as Cutter located him for a second shot. A third bullet tore splinters from the floor between John's cheek and his outstretched hand. He came up to a crouch and drove forward, smacking Cutter in the midsection and causing a fourth bullet to go wild through the roof.

Cutter doubled his knee, trying to sink it into John's abdomen. He let it go like an uncoiling spring. John was knocked away, but not hurt. He roared, swallowed his tobacco, and charged again.

Cutter went for a stranglehold, but that was a mistake. John caught him with a

ripping elbow blow. The stranglehold was loosened, and Cutter hit the wall. John nailed him as he rebounded.

It was a right, perfectly timed. Cutter went to his knees. John lifted him, and smashed home another. Cutter whispered, "Don't! In the name of God, don't!"

John was going for his coat collar to drag him back, but Cutter wriggled away in the dark. He made it to the door, and half-fell, half-leaped to the hurricane deck below. John followed a second later. He looked around, but Cutter had found some place of concealment. Men loomed from every side. He turned to escape, but something struck him. His eyeballs burst with a dazzle of light, and then everything dissolved in a swirl of darkness.

WHEN John came to he was on his back. He raised his aching head to look around. He propped himself on his elbows. There were men gathered around him, but it took him a while to make out who they were.

"Hi, Cap'n," said John to Cutter who stood eight or ten feet away. "Are you aimin' we should finish our duel here and now? I knowed you was a Southern gent'man like myself and wouldn't best a man except in fair, square combat. What weppings are we a-goin' to use?"

Cutter laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. It was the kind of laugh that grinds one's nerves like sandy bread grinds teeth. Cutter took one step forward, John could see moonlight glimmer on the pistol he held.

"Why, we'll each use the weapons we have," smiled Cutter.

John sat up, his eyes taking stock of his predicament. The texas wall was on one side. Cutter's men formed a semi-circle around him with drawn guns.

"Yes," Cutter smiled, "It is true I am a gentleman of the Old South and, that being the case, I will deal with you the way your class should be dealt with. We do not duel with white-trash. We merely do away with them when they become too obnoxious."

Cutter paused and listened. From down below came the sound of popping boiler rivets. The odor of burning grease was heavy on the night air. Overhead, clouds

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of dark smoke still rolled from the twin chimneys. He started to speak—then paused again, his eyes on a form which was struggling toward them.

In a moment they could make out a man, dragging himself painfully. It seemed that his legs were paralyzed, and only his arms had the power of locomotion. He was trying to speak, but his voice did not carry.

"What the devil?" said Cutter.

"It's Stenson, the engineer!" one of his men shouted. "A bullet got him through the legs."

Stenson came on for a few yards, then he paused. He rolled to support himself on one hand and gestured toward the engine room.

"The boilers! They can't last much longer! The safety valve—he—that Comanche John—he roped the anvil to it. . . ."

Cutter took a quick stride toward Comanche John. In the next second, the deck rocked and leaped beneath them. For a time they seemed caught in the midst of a mighty exhalation. Then the craft parted in her middle, hurling her insides toward the sky with a mounting, tumultuous roar.

Comanche John came to and found himself sprawled in the V formed by the sloping deck and the wall of the texas. It had been only a second or two since the explosion, for the air was dense with steam and flame, and the wrecked hulk was strongly on the lurch. Cutter was over there on hands and knees, looking at him.

Cutter's gun had been knocked from his hand. He looked around. By the flame of burning timbers he spotted it wedged among some torn boards of the deck. He made for it, but one of his men staggered up, blocking the way. Cutter cursed and shouldered him aside. The man was half groggy, and he fell. A navy revolver in the man's holster was only a long reach from Comanche John's hand.

John pounced on it just as Cutter turned. The two guns sounded almost in unison, but one of them was first. Comanche John's bullet was a fraction of a second ahead.

Cutter staggered with the lurch of the boat. He hit the deck head first and lay still.

John made it to his feet. He took a step just as the hull, its explosion-born swell ridden out, hit bottom with a grinding crash. John went down from the impact, and the timbers of the burning pilot house pinned him.

He struggled, but he might as well have tried to free himself from the jaws of a bear trap. After a time he lay and rested. Below he could hear the whisper of water as it flowed through the sunken staterooms. And another sound, not so restful—the swiftly accelerating crackle of burning wood.

ROSS MACLAIN and his men waited at Assiniboine Coulee until after midnight. When one o'clock passed with no sign of Cutter or the *White Cloud,* he sent one of his men to a high bluff for a look up and down the river. In ten minutes the lookout came down, pushing his horse at a gallop. He had sighted the flames of a steamboat's pitch baskets five or six miles upstream. The boat, he said, was not moving.

Ross ordered his men up the bluffs, and they covered the distance swiftly. They drew up at edge of the bench and looked down a boat apparently aground. Through the night air came the crackle of gunfire.

He led the way down the bluffs. There was no trail, and the horses picked their way cautiously. Without warning, the nearest steamboat seemed to lift herself from the water, and she burst with a roar and clouds of enveloping steam.

The steam drifted away like fog across the water. The boat came to sight after a quarter-minute, listing and settling into the channel. Fires, spread from the shattered furnaces and broke out along the decks.

Ross drove his horse on and was at the shore when the first of the survivors came splashing in. Cutter's men, and they had little fight left.

"Mist' Ross!"

Ross located the voice. It belonged to a Negro boy who worked for Cutter. "Here I am, Cletus."

"Mist' Ross, Comanche John and de preacher man is still on de boat, yondah. Dey saved de ol' *White Cloud,* but I'm scairt dey's daid now. I jumped in de watah an' spec de preacher is goin' to follow, but I nevah see him no mo'."

"You mean they're alive—on board?"

Ross splashed his mount into the water, but one of his men seized the bridle. "You can't save them now. Look at those decks."

"Save who?"

It was the Parson. He was wading toward the bank through water up to his waist—wading slowly because of some hulk he was dragging behind.

"I reckon this accounts for all that's worth accountin' for," he said, panting from his exertion. "Yep, gaze upon Comanche John. He's a trifle scorched around the whiskers, but it's a light singe compared with what he'll get in the hereafter if he don't mend his ways."

John shook water from his whiskers and sat up in the mire near shore. He had a wild gleam in his eyes.

"You over thar on the stagecoach!" he boomed, "Git yore hands up! Share and share alike is my motto!"

The Parson splashed water on his face, "John! You ain't holdin' up no coach. You're here, fetlock deep in the Missouri."

"Revener? Is that you? Thunderation! Don't tell me you rescued me! Laws!—Comanche John bein' rescued by a sky-pilot! It would be just like one o' my enemies to make up a verse about it."

HALF AN HOUR LATER when they dried off a little and headed toward camp, Ross said, "I don't know how I'll ever make it up to you two men."

John grinned, "You had ort to hire the Parson yonder as a pilot."

Ross said, "There's a girl back in camp I have a question to ask, and if I'm as lucky as I think I am, the Parson will first have to perform a marriage ceremony. After that, he can have the best job on the river. And you too, John."

"Would you make me a captain?"

"You bet I would!"

John scratched his damp whiskers.

"Waal, I could get me Whisky Anderson for mate, and Three-Gun Guffy for second mate, if they ain't been hung. By the way, Ross, I wouldn't be surprised if a pirate boat could do considerable well for herself, long around clean-up time at the mines."

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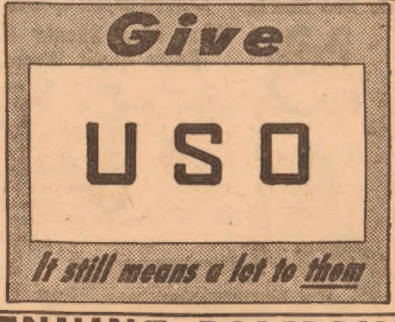

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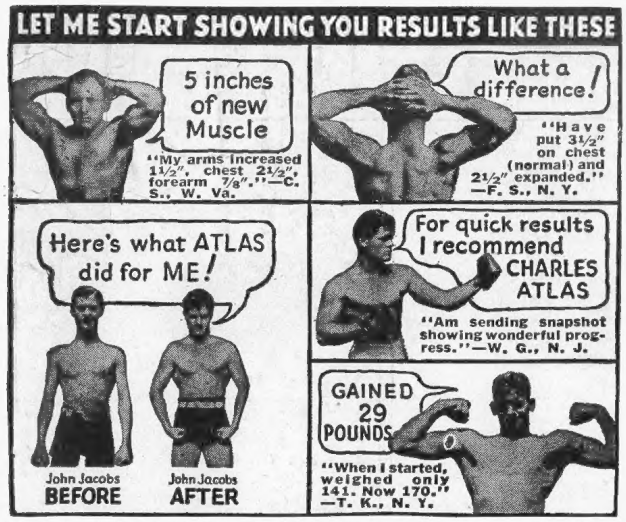

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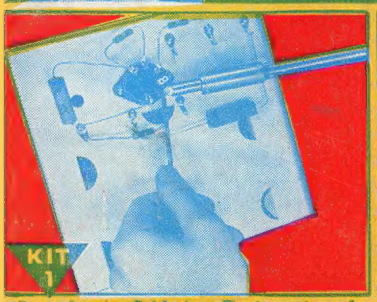

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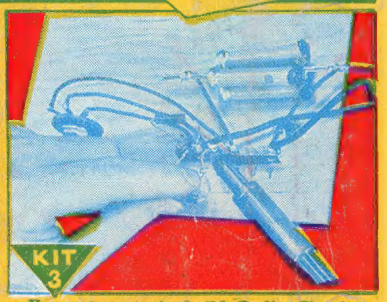

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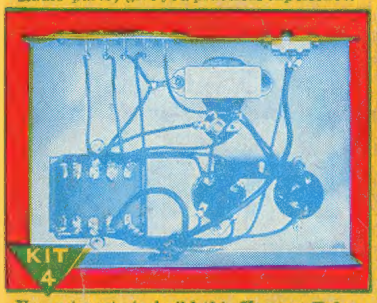

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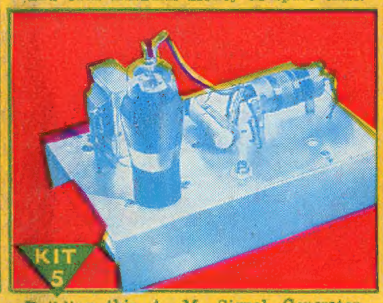

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Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio," both FREE. See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with 6 BIG KITS OF PARTS I send!

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MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6MG
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.
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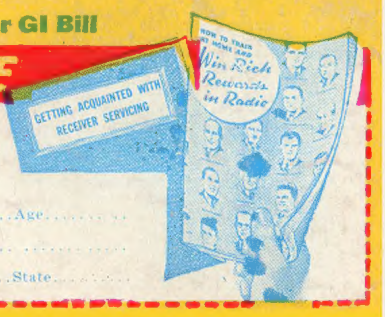
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